

**Grace Galore**  
**John 2:1-11**  
**Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, January 17, 210**

Last Sunday's sermon was based on the Book of Acts story about Simon, a powerful magician who knew he more than met his match when the Apostles brought Christ's Gospel to Samaria. Simon, you remember, quickly realized their signs and wonders were the real deal and even tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit for himself only to be bluntly told God is not for sale.

Today's scripture tells about another miracle at a wedding reception in Cana, a village in Galilee. But before we get into this story it's important we draw distinctions between Simon's magic tricks and Jesus' miracles.

Simon's magic tricks were carefully rehearsed illusions designed to manipulate his audience, whereas Jesus' miracles were spontaneous eruptions of divine power meant to bring joy and new life into the world. Simon's magic tricks were performed to draw attention to himself; Jesus' miracles were performed to draw attention to God.

The story of Jesus turning water into wine is often read at wedding ceremonies, but we miss the point if we think this miracle is just about Jesus saving the groom's family the embarrassment of running out of booze midway through the party. Instead, there are multiple layers of meaning we need to consider before this story can really speak to us.

But before we do, let's put the story in context by briefly reviewing the opening chapter of John's Gospel.

In the prologue of John we read..."In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God. All things came into being through him...What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1, 3-4)

Right away John identifies Christ as the agent of creation who brought life into the world, but there's more. We next hear John the Baptist declare Jesus to be "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29) Jesus present at the creation, also comes into the world to redeem us by becoming the sacrificial lamb who would die for our sins.

Having said that, let's now take a closer look at this Gospel story of Jesus turning water into wine. Jesus, his mother and disciples were guests at a wedding. Like today, weddings were joyful celebrations. Unlike today wedding receptions were run like an open house lasting up to seven days which permitted relatives and friends to come and go and even come back again. Also unlike

today it was the groom's family's responsibility to host the reception and no expense was spared showing hospitality to their guests.

According to Jewish law there were supposed to be large stone water jars available for the Jewish rites of purification. Upon their arrival and before eating, attendants assisted the guests with the mandated ceremonial washings. These stone water jars, set out for the purpose of satisfying the Law of Moses, were the same ones used by Jesus for a totally different purpose: dispensing God's grace freely and abundantly. This isn't just an interesting fun fact, but a critical component of the story. Having water jars handy was all about keeping the law, while turning them into wine vats was all about dispensing God's abundant grace.

One of the recurring themes in the Gospels was the ongoing debate between Jesus and the Pharisees over the importance of honoring the letter over the spirit of the law. The Pharisees were legalist, Jesus was not, especially if keeping the law squeezed the life and joy out of faith and practice.

Father Frank Doyle, who writes the Sunday devotions on the Sacred Space Website, uses the British film "Whiskey Galore" to humorously illustrate the consequences of this conflict between law and grace.

A ship loaded with whiskey headed for America was sunk by a German U boat early one Sunday morning off the coast of Scotland between two islands, one populated by Presbyterians, the other by Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholics had no problem sailing out in their boats that Sunday afternoon (after Mass of course) to salvage the cargo. But the Presbyterians, who had a strict interpretation of keeping the Sabbath holy, "looked on in enraged impotence" while the Catholics hauled in all the free whiskey.

Now I'm not endorsing loading up on free booze, but neither is John's Gospel suggesting Jesus was using his divine powers to restock a wine cellar just to keep the wedding guests happy. In both stories, there's a deeper meaning: the Christian faith shouldn't be straitjacketed with unnecessary rules and regulations that squeeze the joy out of life. Christianity isn't just a list of thou shalt and thou shalt nots. Christianity is all about living the full, abundant life. Christianity is meant to be joyfully experienced.

According to the Gospels, it wasn't at all unusual for Jesus to accept invitations to parties, even though going gave the religious blue noses something more to complain about. But by going to these gatherings, dinners with tax collectors, or wedding receptions of neighbors, Jesus enjoyed himself and other people. What's more Jesus used his experiences at these parties as teaching tools in his parables. He taught "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a great banquet" or "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a wedding feast." Jesus wanted his listeners to learn they were created to both celebrate life and enjoy God.

Getting back to the wedding feast in Cana...after being told the wine ran out Jesus instructed the house servants to fill up the stone jars with water and then pour some out and bring it to the steward who, surprised by the quality, commented to the groom, "You saved the good wine for now."

So, Christ's water into wine miracle wasn't a slick party trick or an abuse of his powers, instead it was a sign drawing our attention to God's love and generosity. The steward's comment, "You saved the best for last." says it all. God provides abundantly, and the best is yet to come.

I think it interesting to note none of the guests at the party, except the house servants, Jesus' mother and the disciples, had a clue about what was happening behind the scenes. They were too busy enjoying the party and since the wine kept flowing, as far as they were concerned, that's all that mattered.

They say ignorance is bliss, but not in this case. I think there're a lot of people who enjoy life but are ignorant of the source of their joy. They either think they make their own joy or they take it for granted, until the tide inevitably goes out while their joy turns into emptiness and despair. Truth is, we can't create or sustain joy on our own. There are no religious laws or rules or regulations that mandate joy. Only God can do that, by grace.

We talk, even sing about God's amazing grace, and we know God's grace is good and wonderful, but do we really know what grace really is?

Maybe this story will help you. When I was in seminary one of my classes was held in a huge lecture hall. Like a good Presbyterian I always sat at a desk in the last row. The time came for the mid semester exam. The professor wrote a scripture passage on the blackboard and instructed us to do the necessary exegesis (which is a fancy word for critical interpretation of the text, word studies, theological themes and all the other stuff educated Presbyterian clergy are supposed to know about Bible passages.) Unfortunately, since I chose to sit in the last row I misread the Bible passage written on the blackboard. I realized my error when I got my exam back with a big red "F" on the top of the page. After class I went up to the lectern and pleaded my case, saying I misread the scripture because I sat in the last row.

The professor glared at me for a second, grabbed my test from my hand, reread it for a few minutes then took his red pen, scratched off the F and gave me a "Gentleman's C." He then gave it back saying, "Cahill, this is a gift of grace."

The British author G.W. Knight wrote, "When a person works an eight hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that's a wage. When someone competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance, that's a

prize. When someone receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievement, that's an award. But when a person isn't capable of earning a wage, can win no prize and deserves no reward—yet receives such a gift anyway—that's a picture of God's unmerited favor. That's what we mean when we talk about the grace of God."

Whiskey Galore's poor Presbyterians "looked on in enraged impotence" while their Catholic brethren gathered up their unexpected treasure. Let that not be true of us, lamenting missed opportunities to grow in our humanity, and live with the freedom to love and be loved unconditionally. May God grant us the wisdom to live by grace galore so we can fully live out our lives being and doing our best for Christ and his Kingdom.