

WINE TASTING

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Mar. 4, 2018
based on Psalm 104:14–16,24; John 2:1–11***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Journey to Jerusalem,” during which we are journeying with Jesus through the course of his public ministry. Today we are considering an event at the start of his ministry, an event to which I refer in every wedding in our church—when Jesus was at a wedding celebration in Cana of Galilee. There Jesus performed the first of his miracles, when he turned water into wine. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The miracle at Cana has been an awkward gospel story in many a Baptist church, or any church that wants to insist that the consumption of alcoholic beverages is a sin. Jesus not only turned water into wine; he turned 150 gallons of water into wine, and he did that after the guests had already had a good amount to drink. Moreover, it was exceptionally good wine. The story concludes with a kind of wine tasting, as the chief steward pronounces the wine to be better than what the host had served to begin with.

Fundamentalist churches—who take the Bible literally and also want to say that drinking beer or wine is sinful—have a difficult time with this story and other gospel stories which plainly indicate that Jesus and his disciples drank wine. Sometimes people will try to argue that Jesus and his disciples had to drink wine because the water was bad. But that is simply untrue. The Bible is full of stories of people drinking water from wells. No one in Biblical times considered the water unsafe, and indeed it was not unsafe when it came from a deep well.

The other common tack from fundamentalists is to suggest that what Jesus drank was unfermented wine. The big problem with that idea is that unfermented wine was technically impossible in the first century, because as soon as you crush grapes, the yeast that is naturally on the skin of the grapes begins working on the sugars in the grape juice to produce alcohol. Unless you drink the juice soon after crushing, you are going to be drinking alcoholic wine, because the alcohol content in the juice rises rapidly. That is why even so-called new wine has a kick.

Unfermented wine, or grape juice, did not exist in the world as a beverage, until Louis Pasteur developed his pasteurization process in the nineteenth century. Pasteur demonstrated that you could use the process to kill off the wild yeast in grape juice; he did that so that he could introduce better yeast to produce better wine! But in America, there was a Methodist who served as a Communion steward at a Methodist church in New Jersey who saw another possibility in the pasteurization process for grapes. His name was Thomas Welch. At the time, in the late 1800s, America had a huge drinking problem. The abuse of alcohol was widespread, leading to all sorts of social ills. Methodists began leading the Temperance movement in response, urging people to simply abstain from

alcohol. But there was a problem. Methodists were serving alcohol every time they had Communion. Some Methodists tried to answer that by crushing fresh grapes right before each Communion service, so that people could have unfermented grape juice. But then you could only have Communion when grapes were in season. Others developed a kind of grape juice by crushing raisins. That was awful. But Thomas Welch used pasteurization to produce bottled grape juice, for the initial primary purpose of Communion. By 1880, the Methodists had adopted it as the standard for all Methodist Communion services. Only later was grape juice marketed as a household beverage.

We still use Welch's grape juice for our Communion services today. It is not because we think there is something sinful about drinking wine. There can't be, since Jesus drank wine, and turned water into wine, and used wine as a symbol of his own blood in Communion! It is interesting that fundamentalists, who claim to take the Bible literally, suddenly don't take the Bible literally when it doesn't fit what they want to think. The Biblical perspective on the consumption of alcoholic beverages is clear—drunkenness is foolish, both condemned and mocked in Scripture. But the moderate and responsible use of alcoholic beverages is fine; and abstinence is fine, and essential for anyone who might have trouble with alcohol.

And here is why we use grape juice in Communion. It is for the same reason that our good Methodist ancestor Welch introduced grape juice for Communion: because there are many people in our society for whom alcohol is a serious problem. Every week in our church, we have six twelve-step groups for people who have been affected by alcohol or drug abuse. We host three narcotics anonymous groups, one alcoholics anonymous group, one al-anon group, and one cocaine anonymous group. About 150 people come to our church every week for these recovery groups. Every Sunday in worship, there are people in recovery in our congregation. The worst thing we could do to them would be to hand them a little glass of wine. So we use grape juice, because we want everyone to be able to come without hindrance to the table of the Lord.

But why are we using wine, or unfermented wine, to begin with? It goes back, of course, to Jesus' last supper, but something of the backdrop to that can be found in the miracle at Cana. John, the writer of the gospel, called this miracle "the first of Jesus' signs." (John 2:11). In other words, this miracle, at the very outset of Jesus' public ministry, is designed to tell us something about how Jesus will work in human lives.

It begins with the host family at a wedding celebration running out of wine—an enormous embarrassment. Jesus' mother came to Jesus saying "They have no wine" (John 2:3), seeming to suggest that he ought to do something about it. Jesus replied, "What concern is that to you and me?" (John 2:4) Why should he be the one to solve the shortage of wine? And he said further, "My hour is not yet come." [John 2:4] He seemed to be saying that now was not the time for him to be doing a spectacular miracle that would clearly reveal his identity as the Son of God. His mother, however, would not take "no" for an

answer. She instructed the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." [John 2:5] And Jesus finally did act, in keeping with her request, to provide the wine. Perhaps we could take this as a sign for all time that kids should obey their mother!

But this finally is not a case of Jesus being pushed to do something he does not want to do. It is significant that Mary, for her part, did not presume to know exactly what Jesus was going to do—she said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you"—but she presented a problem to Jesus and trusted that Jesus would provide an appropriate answer. Thus Mary is an example of having faith that Jesus will be at work to answer a need. In the end, Jesus did take action—he turned water into wine—and thus rescued the hosts from their dilemma. But he did the miracle in such a way that most of the people at the feast had no idea where the wine came from, and thus Jesus kept his identity as Messiah at this point hidden. But his disciples, and of course later readers of the gospel of John, could plainly see what happened' and so the story concludes, "His disciples believed in him." [John 2:11]

On one level, the miracle is a case of Jesus answering, at a crucial moment, a very practical problem faced by an ordinary family living in a small ancient town. It is an indication that Christ will be at work in ordinary places in the very practical problems of daily life. But on another level, the miracle is much more. When Jesus turned water into wine, he created a powerful piece of symbolism illustrating what his whole ministry would be about.

Jesus began by having the servants fill six stone jars with water. *[Six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. John 2:6-7]* The water in these jars was ordinarily used for the Jewish rites of purification—the ritual washing of hands and utensils that was prescribed by Jewish law. They filled the jars to the brim with water.

At a wedding feast in need of beverages, water represents something very bland. Moreover, these water jars normally held water for the old religious purification rituals, which were being very legalistically practiced at the time, and which were just not bringing spiritual vitality to people. The water in these jars can thus be seen as a symbol of the dullness of the people's spiritual lives.

Jesus took the water and turned it to wine. He took something bland and flat and joyless and turned it into something vibrant and full of zest and life. In the Old Testament, wine is a symbol of the fullness of God's blessing. Thus it was listed, in the passage we heard from Psalm 104, as one of the very good gifts of God's bounty. *[You, O Lord, cause plants to grow, that people may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart. Psalm 104:14-15]* So Jesus' miracle was finally a powerful symbol of transformation—and a perfect symbol of how Jesus would work in human lives.

Again and again, Jesus would enter into people's lives and would bring about dramatic change. Jesus would bring people out of spiritual dullness and lack, and out of terrible circumstances, into new, vibrant, and abundant life. He repeatedly "turned water to wine." Here then is a picture of what Christ can do in you and me. There may be times when we feel spiritually dull and lifeless, and times when we feel that our own resources have run out. But Christ can touch us with the transforming power of God's grace. In Cana, the superabundance of wine after the miracle says that God can provide all that we need, and even more. And when the steward remarks in the end that "the best has been saved for last," it is an indication that our future in Christ is far greater than all that has gone before.

A long-time friend and leader in Grace United Methodist Church in Vermilion, Joette McDonald, is a poet who once summarized the miracle at Cana in these words:

Christ at a wedding (I wish it were mine!)
Laughed with the guests, and turned water to wine.
Off with the old! In with the new!
Christ celebrating, and miracles too.
Take thou my life, Lord, tepid and bland.
Touch my earthen vessel with Your powerful hand.
Stir depths within me, the brackish refine
Add sparkle and flavor, and turn me to wine.