

Water Into Wine

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Epiphany III, January 23, 2005

John 2:1-11 RSV

On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples.

When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it.

When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now."

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

This sermon takes the form of a first-person narrative by an imaginary Bible character, a witness to Jesus' first miracle. Think of it as being spoken with a Middle Eastern accent.

My name is Elihu bar Nabas, and I am from Cana in Galilee. I want to tell you about something that happened in my village that changed my life forever.

Our village is a small place. If you blink your eyes while passing through it, you might miss it. But we love our village, and one good thing about it is that we all know each other. In fact, most of us are related in some way. If anything happens in Cana, everyone who lives there is taking part in it.

And our village is close to Nazareth. That's a bigger town, but still we have many friends over there. Why do I tell you these things? Only because they have something to do with my story.

My young cousin Daniel was getting married. Now, with us weddings are a big thing. I mean, a *really* big thing. I have heard that when you people have a wedding it might last two or three hours counting the — what is it you call it, the party afterwards — the reception. Well, with us the wedding might go on for several days, with singing and dancing and lots of feasting — oh, think of all that food, and all that wine! Yes, it's a big — what would you say — a big production. And that's just the party. We don't have, like, a thing where the village rabbi gets up and says, "You take this woman for your wife, yes? You take this man for your husband, yes? Okay, you married!" No, it has all been set up by the parents, maybe years ago. The bride's dad, he says to the groom's dad, "I give you so much money, your son take my beautiful daughter for his wife." The groom's dad, he say, "For that pitiful bunch of money, you think you get my handsome and smart and hard-working son for your daughter? Forget it, you cheapskate." So they argue and finally they make a deal and it's all set. The kids don't have nothing to say about it, and when they are old enough they just start being married — but not till we have the big feast and the whole village has a good time!

So that's where I come into the picture. My cousin, he comes to me and says, "Elihu, I'm going to marry that girl from Nazareth now, that girl Rachel my parents set me up with. And my dad wants you to be the steward for the wedding, okay?" I say, "That's a big job! All those singers and players to get together, all that food and all that wine! How many you figuring to have come to this thing?" He says, "Oh, on our side, just our relatives and close friends." Of course, that's the whole village of Cana. Then I ask him, "And how many on her side?" He says, "I don't know, she has a big family in Nazareth but I don't know how many are coming." I say, "Okay, no problem, we take care of it." So I start to line up the food and everything, and I hire a bunch of servants to help me.

Well, I should have looked into it more, because you know how these things can get out of hand. This girl Rachel had a big family, and her parents had a lot of friends in Nazareth. And all the friends had to be invited, at least that's what it looked like to me. And Rachel's mother, she was good friends with Miriam — you call her Mary, I think — the widow of Joseph the carpenter, God rest his soul. So Mary was there too, and it was her son Yeshua — Jesus, you call him — that bring her over from Nazareth. And along with Jesus come all these guys that are hanging out with him, that he's teaching. Well, I can't say I blame them for coming, 'cause they had left everything behind to follow Jesus and they had nothing, and this was a chance for a free meal anyhow. I guess I shouldn't say that, because they were really a great bunch of guys, as I found out later — all except one, of course, but you know about him. And one of them I already knew, the one called Jochanan — you know him as John. We used to fish together some, and he is an okay guy. He is still around somewhere; I think I heard he has moved up to Asia.

So the big day comes, and the village square is full with people, and the bride and groom and everybody is having a great time — everybody but me! I am running around like a headless chicken, trying to keep the party going. I have to make sure the singers don't take too many breaks, and the players, 'cause they're paid to be there and do their thing and not just party with the rest of us. And then I have to make sure the food people keep it coming, and see that the wine holds out. So, of course, I do what they always do — I have the servants put out the best wine first, because after this crowd has drunk enough of that they won't know the difference when we put out the cheap stuff. We went through a lot of wine that day, 'cause like I say it was a bigger crowd than we was looking for. And what do you know, we ran out of wine! I am steward of the feast, and I am in a big stew over this!

So I have to go ask Daniel if he knows where there's any more wine. I'm on my way, and all of a sudden I meet this lady Mary, Jesus' mother. Don't ask me why, but somehow I think I should tell her the wine is gone. I don't know what I was thinking, but like you say, the rest is history. I never did get to Daniel, because right then somebody came and told me the singers had quit again, and I had to go deal with them so we would get our money's worth out of them. And before I know it, the servants are back with more wine they want me to taste. And it's *really good wine*, the best! I'm thinking, "This is crazy, I got to ask Daniel about this." So I go to him and say, "What's with this wine you're serving? By this time we could have put out the cheap stuff, the Mogen David, but you held back the best wine till now!" He says, "Elihu, I had nothing to do with it. It was this Jesus from Nazareth that came up with it, don't ask me how."

Well, I found out later what happened, because John told me. Mary went to Jesus and told him we were out of wine. And he said to her, "Woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." I didn't think that was a very nice thing for him to say to his mother, but I guess she didn't mind because she told the servants to do whatever he told them. Now, we had these six really big jars there, to hold water for our washings. You know, when different things happen you're supposed to wash yourself, like if you touch a dead body, or if you brush up against a Gentile, or if you have a baby, all that sort of thing. We got rules for everything. Anyway, Jesus tells the servants to fill these jars up with water, and then take some out and bring it to me. So that's what they did, and like I say, when I tasted it, it was the best wine I am having in a long time.

So, Jesus saved our party, but there's more to the story than that. I mean, he didn't turn that water into wine just to get me out of a jam. It wasn't to show what a great wine maker he was, and I never heard that he did that anywhere else. If he did, it would have put our local grape growers out of business, and that would have been big trouble for us, and maybe for him. Jesus wasn't into making that kind of trouble — you know about the kind of trouble he makes, the kind that really counts.

Well, I guess this wedding at Cana really was the beginning of some trouble, because of what John explained to me later. See, those six big jars weren't just any old jars. They stood for our religion, and all our old ways of believing. There were only six of them, you see, not seven which is the perfect number. Our religion didn't give us the big picture about what God was up to. So it wasn't much help to us with all our problems with the Romans and like that. In fact it got our people into big problems later on when they thought they could fight off those Romans.

But Jesus put new wine into those old jars, and John says that's a sign of God's Holy Spirit coming fresh upon us, to lead us back to where we're supposed to be with the Lord. I said that was the beginning

of some trouble, because there were people that wanted things to stay like they were and this Holy Spirit thing really made them nervous. Later on they got the Romans to put Jesus on the cross, and that was his “hour” he said hadn’t come yet when he was at the wedding.

So it was a pretty big day in Cana for Daniel and Rachel, but it was a big day for those guys that were hanging out with Jesus, too. John told me later how they took it, when Jesus turned that water into wine. They had been looking for help from the Lord, they had been looking for signs that God is real and is at work in our lives. We *all* had been looking for that — for God to show up again, I think you call it an “epiphany.” And that day back in Cana it happened; Jesus gave a sign, and God showed up. And, John said to me, that’s when he, and all the other guys with him, they saw the glory of this man Jesus, and they believed in him as our *Mashiach*, our Messiah — the one who makes God known to us and changes our lives.

I came here to tell you all about it, and to tell you that now I believe in Jesus, myself. And I hope you do, too.

Thank you very much.

Sermon text ©2005 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable