

The Real Miracle
John 2:1 – 11
Sunday, January 20, 2019

There is a picture that has made the rounds online. It's in a grocery store, and it shows all these shelves of wine. But *above* the wine bottles, someone has taken the sign that says, "Wine," and switched it out with a sign that says, "Water." And the caption on the picture says, "Jesus was here!"

This is a story that a lot of us are at least *somewhat* familiar with. Even people who aren't Christians or aren't that familiar with the Bible know something about Jesus turning water into wine. We see references to this all over the place: popular culture, jokes, bumper stickers, t-shirts. This is one of the most well-known things about Jesus, that he turned water into wine.

But here's the problem. When people talk about Jesus turning water into wine, all of the focus is on *what he did*; on the act itself, the fact that Jesus could take one thing and turn it into something else. We say that that shows God's *power*. The fact that he could *do* that, it shows that Jesus was *God*.

So when we look at this miracle, we focus on *what Jesus did*; the *act* of turning water into wine. What we hardly *ever* talk about is *why Jesus did it*. *Why* did Jesus turn water into wine? To keep the party going? To show his *power*? To *prove* that he was God? *Why* did Jesus turn water into wine? He wasn't doing it just to do it; just to show that he *could*. There's a *reason* for it. There's something else going on here; something that actually has some pretty significant implications for *our* lives today.

When Jesus performed miracles (and pretty much every other time we read about a miracle in scripture), the *purpose*, the *point* of that miracle is not just to prove God's power so that people will believe in him. That certainly *happens* – it's a byproduct – but it's not the *point*. It's not the *reason* he does it. The *point* of Jesus' miracles is to break down the barriers that are keeping us from God and from each other. To remove or overcome the things that are keeping us from being *whole* with God and with each other

That's what a miracle is. When God removes the obstacles and the barriers that are keeping us apart. When God acts in such a way that it restores the *wholeness* and *harmony* of the world and of our lives and allows us to be *at one* with God and our neighbor. That's the point of everything that Jesus does; his birth, life, teachings, healings, his death and resurrection, all of it is to make us *at one* with God and with each other. That's the *purpose* of a miracle.

Now, with that in mind, let's take a look at this story of Jesus turning water into wine. Jesus is at a wedding, and they run out of wine. So they come to Jesus for help. The key to understanding this story and this miracle is in verse 6. It says, "Standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification...." That's like a detail that we just skip over all the time. Seems like an insignificant detail. But it is actually *incredibly important*. Six stone jars, filled with water, for the Jewish rites of purification.

We see this all throughout the Old Testament. If you have leprosy, you have to go through this process of ritual cleansing. If you touch blood or a dead body, you have to go through this process of ritual washing. There are all these circumstances where, if this thing happens to you, if you do *this*, you have to go through a rite of purification. Otherwise, you are considered *impure*, *unclean*, and *unacceptable to God*. You were not allowed to enter into the presence of

God if you did not go through this ritual washing. If you were *unclean* or *impure*, you couldn't go in to the temple to worship or make the sacrifices necessary for God to forgive your sin. You *had* to make these offerings and sacrifices in order to be right with God, and if you were unclean, you couldn't *do* that. So this ritual purification, it was a big deal. Because being *unclean*, it kept people from God, and it kept from each other. Lepers were forced to live on the outskirts of town, isolated from the community. There are instances where, if a woman was unclean, she had to go off by herself for a period of time, isolated from the community. So this process of ritual purification had significant religious and social implications.

At this wedding there would have been a huge feast; lots of food. According to Jewish law, any time they were going to have a big feast or eat like this, the Jewish people had to go through this ritual washing; this rite of purification. So these stone jars were there for the people, as they're coming in to the wedding celebration, to cleanse and purify themselves so that they were keeping Jewish law; they were right with God, acceptable to God.

Jesus takes *those jars of water*, reserved for a special religious ritual, and turns *that* water into wine. What that means is, there's no more water left for the rite of purification. People can't wash themselves, cleanse themselves as they come to the feast. That's a *problem*, right? But Jesus takes the water of *ritual* and turns it in to the *wine* of *celebration*. And in doing so, he is saying, "You don't *need* that anymore. You don't *need* to wash, to go through this ritual of cleansing and purifying yourself in order to be acceptable to God. That stuff is not going to keep you from God anymore. That's not what makes you *right* with God, *at one* with God. We can *celebrate* now because God is *removing that barrier* that keeps you from God, and God is *doing* that in *me*."

Now, *we* don't have ritual washing, rites of purification that *we* have to go through anymore. But this miracle is *still* as significant for *us* as it was for *them*. Because so many times, we operate under that mindset that I have to *do* more and more and more in order to please God and be right with God. That I have to take part in certain *rituals* in order to earn God's favor, whether it's baptism, communion, coming to worship, reading scripture, praying, confessing, tithing, whatever; that I have to *do these things* to be at one with God, to be *acceptable* to God, at *peace* with God. That I have to *prove* myself to God, and God's blessing for me is about what I *do*.

All of those things are important parts of our faith, but Jesus did not come to say, "God loves you *if...*" *If* you do the right things, the right way. *If* you meet all the requirements. *If* you *earn it* or *deserve it*. *If* you *prove* your faith. Jesus says, "*Just the way you are*, with your dirty hands and broken lives; with all your pain and mistakes. God loves you and accepts you and is with you *just the way you are.*"

A life of faith is about *celebrating* that Jesus has broken down all the barriers that work to keep us from God. That is the *miracle* that God gives us; that what was once *impossible* (us being at one with God) is now *abundantly possible*. The hard part is *believing* in that miracle; *believing* that God loves me, accepts me as I am, with no conditions or requirements. That's ten times harder than believing Jesus turned water into wine, because it's engrained in us that our *worth* as human beings is based on what we *do*. And what Jesus is telling us is, "Your worth is not based on *what you do*. It's based on *who you are* as a child of God. It's not just who *you* are, but who *I* am."

That is the message that we as Christians, as the church, have to share with the world. That you are beautiful and wonderful and loved and your life has *value* simply because of *who you are*, not what you *do* or what you've *done*. That is an *extraordinarily* countercultural message. Because the world around us tells us that our worth, our value is based on what we *do*, how hard we *work*, what we *produce*, what we *have*, what we *earn*. And what happens is, we *hear* that so much every day in all these subtle little ways, and it's really easy to buy into that. And it starts to creep into our faith, and then it starts to filter into our life together as the church. And we think that God's love for us, God's blessing for us depends on what we do to *earn it*.

So what happens is, churches become too focused on *ritual*. We become *dependent* on *ritual*. We *have* to do *this* thing *this* way, because *that's* what's acceptable to God; that's what makes *us* acceptable to God.

We *have* to be baptized (and be baptized *in this way*), because *that's* what makes us acceptable to God. We have to do communion in this way, because *that's* what makes us acceptable to God. We have to worship in this way, follow this order of worship, use this type of music, sing these songs, because *that's* what makes us acceptable to God, and if we don't *do* these things in this way, if we do something *different*, then I don't feel like what we're doing is acceptable to God, and if I'm doing it, then that means that *I'm* not acceptable to God. We *have* to do these things because we've *always done them*, that's the way this works, that's the way *God* works, and if we don't *do* these things this way, then God might not accept us or love us or bless us.

That's the mindset that we can fall into. And we're not always conscious of it. Sometimes it's a very subconscious thing. We get so focused and dependent and *stuck* in our rituals that we end up missing the point of them. That the reason we *do* those things isn't *so that* God will accept us

and love us and bless us. The reason we worship and baptize and share communion and sing and pray and read scripture and tithe and all that stuff is *because* God loves us and accepts us. We're *celebrating* God's love and acceptance in our lives. We want to do these things to give *thanks to God*. Jesus took the water of ritual and turned it into the wine of celebration, and if we get too focused or stuck on the *ritual*, on the act itself, we're going to end up missing out on the *celebration!*

That's true for every aspect of our lives. If we get too focused on the way things *should* be, the way things are *supposed* to be, then we're going to miss out on the way things *are* and the way things *can be*.

I mean, what if there had been someone at that wedding who said, "Jesus, you *can't* turn that water into wine! We *need* that water to be acceptable to God!" They would have missed out on the celebration and the *good news* that Jesus was proclaiming in that moment. That *we are free*. Free from the demands of ritual. Free from the need to do more and more and more to earn God's favor. Free to be accepted and to accept others. Free to forgive because we are forgiven. Free to love because we are loved. Free to live our lives *with God* and with *each other* in *celebration!* Free to drink up the miracle that we are good enough for God *just the way we are*. *That is the real miracle.*

A life of faith is meant to be a celebration of the grace and mercy and abundance and goodness of God. And *that* is why Jesus turned water into wine.