

SERMON for Sunday, January 14, 2007
 John 2:1-11, I Corinthians 12:1-11

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Not to Be Believed

Walking two by two, the smaller ones in the front and the taller coming after, they sang more or less confidently, 'Give to the Winds Thy Fears,' that heartening reassurance of Divine protection now known to every WCTU member as the Crusade Hymn. Every day they visited the saloons and the drug stores where liquor was sold. They prayed on sawdust floors or, being denied entrance, knelt on snowy pavements before the doorways, until almost all the sellers capitulated. And so began the campaign to end the consumption of alcohol in excess that has ruined families, wasted money, and torn at the fabric of relationships and society, the beginning of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1874. While the organization's sometimes strident tone has led to ridicule, the need for their diligence has not yet diminished. So here we are, talking about turning water into wine, and by Jesus, no less, and recorded in the Bible for all to read and hear. For those who want to read the Scripture as a literalist document to dictate everything about behavior and rules of both church and society, this wedding feast at Cana can be interpreted to mean that indeed, we are to have wine at weddings and definitely at communion. And believe me, many have pointed to this text to support their own impulsive and destructive behavior.

That's not it, that is not this wedding at Cana. But the details and symbols of the story are of interest, and of import. Let me take a quick run-through. The story begins with the words, *on the third day*. Sound familiar? A symbolic third day, perhaps, when the greatest miracle of resurrection would be taking place. The conversation between Jesus and his mother was curious. Mary wanted Jesus to do something about the fact that the wedding wine had all been drunk, and urged Jesus to do something about it. Maybe it was because she knew that her son could, and he alone could save the situation. But he refused to listen to her, reminding her that it wasn't for producing wine that he was born the son of God. These very large stone jars were there not for the purpose of aging fine wine, but for the rites of Jewish purification. They were big enough, twenty to thirty gallons each, to hold far more than was needed for any wedding. That's anywhere from 120 to 180 gallons of wine, more than enough. In the story, did you notice that the steward, the maitre d', the head waiter, did not know how in the world wine had gotten into the big jars meant for water? What a surprise he had to present to the bridegroom. It was only the servants who knew – and we, living on the other side of this gospel, know the meaning of servant when it comes to understanding Jesus. And the phenomenon of the wine itself. Now, if you are a party planner, you know that the best food and drink is served first, when anticipation is high and the festivities have just begun. Guests' first impressions, you know. But this wine that comes last, this wine of Jesus, is the finest! And maybe the finest even if served after everyone is filled with dinner, the edge of appreciation taken off the senses. And the wedding families were saved from a host of social embarrassments, from being considered inhospitable when family and friends had gathered from far and near, indeed a social gaffe in middle eastern hospitality.

So all these details, ending with *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed him*. Why would the gospel writer begin with what seems a frivolous occasion, and an even more frivolous

miracle? What is wine compared with healing a crippled man, giving sight to a blind person, restoring mental wholeness to someone ravaged with hearing voices, feeding hungry crowds, including gentiles and Samaritans and outcasts with leprosy, welcoming them into God's circle of love? Wine at a party?

I remember seeing a T-shirt once, at a large church assembly, that had splashed across the front in large letters and design, *Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming!* And down at the bottom, in small type, the admonition, *Look busy*. That advice might be addressing the issue of avoidance of coming face to face with Jesus, but I think it might also speak to our preoccupation with being busy, eking out our own little lives of daily existence, trying to make life fair, spreading the goods around equally to all, worrying and worrying and worrying. We are so busy that we fail to see Jesus and, in Jesus, God's glory. The miracle story of Cana's wedding is offensive, in a way, that Jesus would pay attention to wine when there are far more important issues, of our own lives and the life of the world. Hunger, homelessness, issues of justice, disease and grief, greed and violence and war. It is hard on a weekend when we celebrate the contribution of civil rights leaders and Martin Luther King, Jr., in particular, to concern ourselves with water into wine. But, of course, it is not a story of wine alone, but a story of abundance, of God's abundance, no more, and no less.

Several years ago minister Joe Small traveled under the auspices of the World Council of Churches to Romania, to Durau Monastery of the Romanian Orthodox Church, a nine-hour twisty bus ride from the capital city of Bucharest high into the Carpathian Mountains. The story of Durau Monastery is a dramatic one, and here is Joe's telling: *During the brutal communist dictatorship, monastic vocations dwindled. Many monasteries had to be abandoned as aging monks and nuns were consolidated in historic sites. However, little Durau Monastery was not very important in the larger picture...except to the communist party. Durau's site in the Carpathian Mountains made it a perfect location for a ski resort that could be used as a winter playground for party apparatchiks. The Communist Party wanted the extensive monastery property. But there was a problem. Romanian law stipulated that monastery property could not be confiscated as long as the monastery itself functioned, as long as monks or nuns were present to pray the liturgy. Why didn't the party simply ignore the law? The workings of the bureaucratic mind are mysterious, because the party obeyed the law and would not move against the monastery...until the last monk left. Durau was a small monastery, with a dwindling community of aging monks. The old men died, one by one, until only a few remained. Communist officials, eagerly anticipating the death of the few monks who were hanging on, constructed chalets for the big wigs and hotels for the party faithful. In spite of construction commotion, the monks stayed. Increasingly impatient, Bucharest bureaucrats began to schedule wild weekends in the chalets, blaring loud music and flaunting lewd behavior. But the monks stayed, praying the liturgy daily, and praying for the life of Durau. Party officials knew that the property would be theirs eventually. The old monks continued to die off, until only three were left, and then two, and then one. He was very old, and communist plans were laid for clearing ski slopes and constructing lifts. Yet the last monk of Durau continued to pray the liturgy, and pray for the life of the monastery. For years he prayed alone. He was the Durau Monastery. The communist regime died before the last monk of Durau. The Soviet empire collapsed, the brutal dictator Nicolae Ceasescu was deposed, Romania was liberated, and Durau monastery was once again fully and freely within the Orthodox Church's life. Durau Monastery – and more – now belonged to the church, for the new government gave the chalets and the hotels to the church as well! Thus, little Durau became a wonderful retreat and conference*

center, hosting pilgrimages and retreats, and ecumenical conferences for Romanians and visitors from around the globe. I thank God for the last monk of Durau. I don't picture him as a resistance fighter, defying an evil tyranny in the name of freedom. I picture him doing what monks do, praying and working for the glory of God...

The abundance of God, the glory of God revealed in the life of a faithful monk tucked away in the mountains of Romania, and water was turned into wine.

And for today, words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoken when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964: *I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. 'And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.' I still believe that we shall overcome. This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born. Today I come to Oslo as a trustee, inspired and with renewed dedication to [humanity]. I accept this prize on behalf of all who love peace...*

The abundance of God, the glory of God revealed in the slow and persistent struggle of one man among many who love peace, and water is turned into wine.

God's abundance! Water is turned into wine in so many ways, in so many places. Who would believe that Jesus, without even telling anyone, without anyone knowing, in a simple and quiet back corner of the village of Cana banquet hall, would turn plain ordinary water into lush and abundant wine? And Jesus still does. Have you tasted it? Amen.