

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
“Swirl, Sniff, and Savour: Cana’s Unique Vintage”
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Craig Janzen Neufeld

Introduction

Now, I’m sure you’ve had enough when it comes to banquets and feasts. I know I have. And yet, we begin this year with one more feast. A wedding feast, after all, it’s a special event. And it’s worth observing and celebrating. So, if you will permit me this morning, I’d like to offer us a visual to consider...and in case you’re wondering, it’s grape juice, but let’s imagine for a moment.

About John

The Gospel of John is a unique vintage. Insofar as it doesn’t follow too closely the same narrative as the other three Gospels found at the beginning of the New Testament. John’s Gospel doesn’t share any of the same sources as Matthew, Mark, or Luke share, namely the ‘Q’ document. John’s out on their own, telling the story their own way, with their own focus and their own purpose.

So rather than writing to demonstrate the ‘royalness’ of Jesus, as Matthew does, or presenting Jesus as a suffering servant as Mark does, or to the Gentiles or those on the fringes, as Luke does, John is preoccupied with the supernatural, which is why John’s Gospel is often called the Gospel of ‘signs and wonders.’ In that many of Jesus’ miracles are promoted as signs or wonders.

In addition to this, John is also preoccupied with leading readers to belief in Christ, and also leading believers to believe again in Christ. But John’s understanding of belief is more than a cognitive thing; it’s more than a head trip. To John, belief is confirmation, not coercion; John’s not interested in proof or compelling readers; rather, John’s Gospel seeks to affirm and reaffirm our faith that Jesus is God made flesh.

These are some of the unique characteristics of this particular vintage. This text is filled with subtlety and symbolism. These are all a part of the particular bouquet of this text, the aroma, if you will. And at the same time, it does not demand a particular palate to discern all of these characteristics, just a little imagination.

This passage is meant to be sipped and savoured; for this is no mere cooking wine, it’s fine, and deserves to be drunk slowly. We only need to uncork the bottle, pour ourselves a glass, swirl it, sniff it and swish it around, but not spit (we dare not do that) to appreciate the fullness of this particular text. John writes and aims for his words to be not just for connoisseurs but for everyone to ‘taste and see.’

Swirl

Pouring ourselves a glass of this fine vintage, we first swirl it around to take a look at it. On this surface, it appears to be a simple problem which Jesus solves.

Timing is vague, but sometime after Jesus had called his disciples, on the ‘Third day’, Jesus, his disciples, and his mother were present at a wedding in Cana, when the libations ran dry. This is a problem, a pretty significant problem; it’s a problem that Jesus’ mother notices, now,

perhaps this is because she's used to keeping an eye on such things, maybe she sees the look of horror in the servant's eyes, or maybe she notices commotion all around as the host tries to track down some more wine.

Whatever the case, Jesus' mother notices and mentions it to Jesus. And while initially, Jesus appears to be reluctant to intervene, he relents and instructs the nearby servants to fill the stone water jars to the brim, and then to take a sample and deliver it to the sommelier to taste. After tasting it, no doubt relieved and surprised, the headwaiter calls the groom, the host over and praises them for their hosting style. They're commended for not cutting back on the celebrations and bringing out the second-rate wine once folk are well into the party. And our vignette ends with Jesus, his mother, and the disciples heading off to Capernaum.

At first glance, we see a typical miracle story: the setting is established, a problem is introduced, the problem is brought to Jesus' attention, a miracle addresses the need, and there is a response to that miracle. But there's more to this story than a narrative structure. And there's more to this story than a miracle. This vintage has more depth than the eye can see.

Sniff

As we bring our glass closer, we sniff and smell and begin to ask questions. Why was this such a big deal? What beyond the miracle itself does this reveal to us about God and Jesus?

The Gospel of John, as mentioned earlier, is filled with symbolism, and the setting for this story is no mere chance. That this takes place on the third day could be a symbolic foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection. Whether it is or isn't, I leave to you, but at the very least, it's a signal to us readers that there is more than meets the eye here.

Feasting, in Jesus' ministry, is a popular motif; in fact, Jesus has been referred to as a glutton and a drunkard for the amount of table fellowship which he participated in. That John couches this first miracle at a wedding, I don't think, is any coincidence.

This wedding is not the beginning of that trend in John's Gospel; rather, I see it as a reference to the Messiah. On one hand, we notice subtleties of God's relationship with humankind in the imagery of bride and bridegroom being implied. On the other hand we can smell notes of the Messianic feast being referenced here, as the Messiah is presented and made known.

The Messianic feast, evoked in Isaiah 25, references a banquet prepared by God for all the peoples, a feast of aged wine, of choice meat, of finely aged wine. What could our gospel writer be trying to bring our attention to here?

That there are only six water jars, on less than seven, the number symbolic of perfection and completeness, is beside the point. And while we might be astonished by how much water is miraculously transformed, quick math suggests anywhere between 120 and 180 gallons! The volume here isn't what matters most. In the end, what we need to remember is that a whole lot of water becomes a whole lot of wine. Libations will flow and will likely outlast the party.

What may be of interest is the Gospel writer pointing out that they were the same stone water vessels used for the Jewish cleansing ritual. I think it's more than just convincing that these are mentioned. We must be careful to not interpret this story as negative commentary on Jewish rituals and customs. Symbolically, this could be an example of Jesus creating something new, through his Jewish context. That he is less replacing Jewish ritual, and instead transforming and expanding. An extension of his use of "you've heard it said...and I say to you..." to expand Jewish teaching and law.

And lastly, it's the quality that is of note, and this refers back to, I think, the Messianic Banquet in Isaiah, the decadence suggested by Isaiah, is reflected in the quality of the particular vintage. It would, no doubt, stand up and complement the foods rich in flavour; rich foods filled with marrow found at the Messianic Banquet.

Swish (but not spit)

Now, gazing at and smelling a fine wine without tasting it misses the full experience. We must also sample it ourselves. As we taste this cup, what does it reveal to us?

As I taste, as I swish it around my mouth, transformation is the undertone which tickles my taste buds. It's the bouquet which fills my nostrils. So much of this passage is concerned with transformation, literal and figurative. While we tend to focus on the transformation of water to wine, as our taste buds might tell us, there's more going on.

Running out of wine at a wedding is no mere lapse of judgment; Middle Eastern ears would listen to this story with horror. In an honour-shame culture, such as first-century Palestine, this oversight could provide a stain on one's social status. So running out of libations is a problem. To not provide sufficiently for guests is not just a social faux pas; it's a great shame. As one commentator writes: "This is not just a shortage but a shameful feeling of poverty at the precise moment when we would want to convey the richness of hospitality."¹

By completing this miracle, Jesus redeems the shame of the host family and allows them to maintain their honour in their community. But not only maintaining honour, Jesus no doubt makes them rebound. This wedding and this family, unnamed as they are, will likely be remembered as the family that served the best wine later on, rather than skimping on the quality of the wine, the longer the party went on, they quality, instead improved. They would certainly be the talk of the town for some time.

Jesus also transforms the scarcity into abundance. This wasn't a bottle or a few wineskins; this was gallons of wine; it was excess. This was enough wine to keep the party going for some time, and likely with leftovers. It might seem like a humorous exaggeration, but this exaggerated amount is precisely the point. Jesus takes and makes sacred, filling the world "up to the brim." Making our cup to "overflow." To echo the psalm.

Jesus transforms the common and makes it succulent, rich, flavourful, and full-bodied. The cup that Jesus shares at this wedding reflects not just the Messianic Banquet, but it's also foretelling communion. Where Christ shares the cup of the new covenant, a cup that is overflowing and abundant, a bottomless cup, a cup that endures. In the same way, he takes ordinary bread he transforms it into something extraordinary.

While this morning's miracle centers on the wine, what's happening around and behind the miracle confirms and highlights the divine reality that, in this case, Jesus steps out and inaugurates a new era, ushering into the world God's abundant, extravagant, excessive goodness and grace in a concrete and definitive way. Jesus is in the business of transformation; Jesus transforms the fear of scarcity into the joy of abundance. He turns the servant's feelings of helplessness into celebration. The transformation of water into wine is but

¹ Hoch-Yidokodiltoma, R.P. (2020) *Commentary on John 2:1-11, Working Preacher from Luther Seminary*. Available at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/wedding-at-cana-2/commentary-on-john-21-11-2> (Accessed: 10 January 2026).

a foretaste of the transformation Jesus evokes in the lives of his followers and the transformation those followers will make in the world.

We are invited to this wedding to partake of this unique and special vintage. So come and enjoy it. Swirl it in your glass, sniff its bold yet delicate aroma, sip it and swish it in your mouth, marvel at its rich, silky, oaky texture, but please, don't spit it out.

Amen