

## WHEN THE WINE RUNS OUT

Scriptures: John 2:1-11

This scripture passage has never been very popular with the temperance movement. Some have tried to argue that Jesus did not really turn the water into wine, he turned it into unfermented grape juice—sort of high grade Welch’s. But it is obvious that when the steward says to the bridegroom: “You have kept the good wine until now,” he wasn’t talking about grape juice. This is a story about Jesus turning water into wine. The question is why?

Actually this is one of many questions about this story. Why was Jesus’ mother worried about the lack of wine in the first place? Why did she go to Jesus with the problem? And why did Jesus respond to her so negatively: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come?” What a way for Jesus to address his mother: Woman! Why does Jesus dismiss his mother’s concern, then turn around and make more wine than the guests would ever need? These are just a few of the questions raised by this story.

The lack of answers to these questions has led to some bizarre interpretations. I read one interpretation that said the wedding guests ran out of wine because Jesus and his disciples were drinking so much. So Mary tried to get Jesus to go home by telling him, “The wine has run out. Come on.” But Jesus says, “My hour has not yet come,” meaning “I’m not through partying.”

That’s how weird it can get when you take all the actions and words of this story literally. On a purely factual level this story makes no sense. Why would Jesus do a miracle like this? I can understand Jesus using his power to heal people or feed people, but to help them get soused? Why would Jesus do such a thing, especially after telling his mother it is not their problem?

Like many stories in John’s gospel this story has to be read symbolically. It is not just about wine; it’s about life.

Let’s start from the beginning. Verse 3: “When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’” Why is this issue brought up here in the Bible? Is God really concerned about whether people have enough alcohol in their diet? I don’t think so. Running out of wine is a symbol for a spiritual condition. People are thirsting for something they have not yet found.

There is a story I once heard about Mother Theresa visiting the United States. After working for years in the squalor and poverty of Calcutta, India, she was asked what she thought of the prosperity here in America. She said, “I have never seen so many starving people.” She wasn’t talking literally, any more than John is in this story. She was talking about the spiritual condition of people in the United States.

I have quoted before from a book by social psychologist David G. Myers called *The American Paradox*. Among many other statistics he points out that per person income in the United States even when adjusting for inflation has more than doubled since 1960. At the same time the divorce rate has doubled, the teen suicide rate has tripled, the violent crime rate has

quadrupled, and the number of people reporting serious depression has increased by ten times (pp. 5-6). He quotes Martin Seligman, the president of the American Psychological Association, who said, “Every statistic we have on the ‘objective’ well-being of young Americans is going north. And every statistic we have on their demoralization, on depression, is going the other direction” (p. 7). The wine is running out!

This scripture passage is not about having enough booze at a party. It’s about having a life that is worth living. The usual ways to pursue such a life: make money, gain status, travel, fill your life with possessions and adventure, find a soul mate on cupid.com—these are no longer working. They no longer make us feel worthwhile and fulfilled. The wine has run out.

But now we come to the next verse—verse 4. Jesus says to his mother, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.” What does Jesus mean: “My hour has not yet come”?

It turns out that expression is used several more times in the gospel of John. In chapter 7 Jesus gets into a controversy with the religious leaders of Jerusalem, and verse 30 says, “Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.” What does that mean: “His hour had not yet come”? It must have something to do with getting arrested. There is our first clue.

In John 12:23 Jesus uses the same expression again. Jesus and his disciples have just arrived in Jerusalem and he says to them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” When Jesus uses the expression “Son of Man” he is talking about himself. The hour has come for him to be glorified. That sounds good. But in the very next sentence Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.” Now suddenly the hour of Jesus’ glorification is associated with death. That is confirmed in the next chapter when Jesus sits at the last supper with his disciples. At the very beginning of that meal John tells us, “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.” Now we are getting the picture. The “hour” for which Jesus has been waiting is the hour of his death, the hour that will also mark the beginning of a new life with God for all of us.

So what does Jesus mean when he says to his mother, “Don’t worry about the wine; my hour has not yet come”? He means that our real need cannot be met by more wine. Your real need cannot be met by more money, more possessions, more travel, more parties, more relationships, more recognition. It can only be met when Jesus’ hour comes, when Jesus’ body is broken for us and his blood is shed for us on a cross.

If that is the case, however, then why does Jesus turn around produce more wine for the party? Not just a little wine, either. There is a little detail in verse 6: “Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. And Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’” That is the water Jesus turned into wine: 120 to 180 gallons worth! High quality stuff according to the steward! That was going to be some party. If wine will not ultimately satisfy us, why does Jesus make so much of it?

Because wine in this story is a symbol. This story is not about alcohol consumption. It is about meeting the deepest needs, the deepest yearnings of our heart. And that is what Jesus can do.

This story will be replayed over and over in John's gospel. In chapter 6 a crowd will come to Jesus looking for a limitless supply of bread. Jesus will give them more bread than they ever imagined. He will turn five loaves into enough bread to feed 5000 people, just like turning the water into wine. But he will do it as a sign: a sign that he himself is the true bread of life. In chapter 9 a blind man will want restoration of his sight. Jesus will give it to him, just as he gave the wine at the wedding feast. But he will do it as a sign: a sign that he himself is the light of the world.

Jesus produces wine here in this story, not because wine is what we need most but because he is what we need most. The wine is meant to be a sign pointing us to him. As we read in our first scripture lesson, Jesus wants us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, because only then will everything else in our lives find its proper place.

One of my favorite interpretations of this story is the one given in a sermon by Martin Luther. Martin Luther was preaching about this story of Jesus at a wedding where the wine ran out. He said, "How true that is. I have known many couples infatuated with love, who six months later wanted to be quit of the whole thing. The wine had run out." "But notice," Martin Luther went on, "Jesus did not get rid of the water. Nor does he get rid of the struggles and vexations of our lives. But he turns the water into wine, and they only know how sweet it is who have tasted it."

Jesus came to give us new life; not just wine, not just bread, not just a quick fix for all our problems. Jesus came to give us new life, and they only know how sweet it is who have tasted it.

- Ken Onstot