

A Little Off-the-Cuff Oenology

A number of years ago, I was on study leave and my program scheduled an evening lecture by a new testament professor, Clifton Black, on the Gospel and Johnny Cash. I was skeptical. It wasn't what I expected, and let's be honest, I'm not a huge country music fan to begin with.

I sat in the lecture room listening, more than a little surprised – sheepish even – to realize that I found the lecture and the music, well, toe-tapping. I decided after the lecture to expand my musical horizons just a bit, and hopped in my car and drove down to the local Best Buy (this was before iTunes) to pick up the Live at Folsom Prison album, because, and I'm slightly surprised to admit this, I liked those Folsom Prison Blues.

It seems my colleagues had beaten me to the punch, though, and all of the Live from Folsom Prison Albums had already been bought. So, I settled instead on the Johnny Cash at San Quentin album, tearing the cellophane off as I walked back to my car. I quickly scanned ahead to Folsom Prison Blues and left the CD playing as I drove back to campus. As the album continued playing, there was a lengthy portion of narration by Johnny Cash between the songs, and after *Ring of Fire*, Cash decided to turn his concert in a slightly more spiritual direction and began to tell the assembled prisoners about a trip that he and his wife, June Carter Cash had taken the previous May.

Cash and Carter had taken a trip to Israel with a tape recorder to capture the sounds of the people and places of Israel. They went to Nazareth and Tiberias, capturing the sounds to share with the prisoners of San Quentin. They went to a little town called Cana, just over the hills from Nazareth, and went into a church built over the cistern where Cash informed the prisoners that the water for miracle of the wedding in Cana of Galilee was drawn. Cash said they recorded the sounds of the water splashing in the cistern, echoing in the church. He walked out of the church murmuring, "He turned the water into wine, of all things." And then he said he had the closest thing to an inspiration he ever had. In the car on the way to Tiberias, he wrote a song about the experience.

In his incomparable bass, Cash sang, "He turned the water into wine. In the little Cana town, the word went all around, he turned the water into wine.

I've done a fair amount of reading on this passage, scholars have weighed in a good bit on it. Raymond Brown writes of this story that there is not a paucity of symbolism, but rather an embarrassment of riches contained within it for those who would look.

And through Brown's brief glance at the history of interpretation related to this story, there have been quite a number of hypothetical observations levied at this text, the most fascinating having to do, I consider, with the mathematical calculation of exactly how much wine Jesus made in his foray into a little off-the-cuff oenology. (Conservatively estimated at a hundred gallons, for inquiring minds that want to know.)

But when the academic dust settles, the point of the story remains a simple one: He turned the water into wine.

John's gospel narrative is distinctively organized into a predictable pattern, and it's pretty easy to spot when you are reading your Bibles if you know to look for it. If you take off the very beginning and the very end, which form sort of a theological prologue and a redemptive epilogue, the intervening chapters are divided into two subcategories, or "books". There is the book of signs and the book of glory. The first portion is the book of signs, and about halfway through, we move into the book of glory. Jesus performs signs, wonders, miracles in order that people might know who he is. The signs point to the coming glory. That's the basic idea: Signs, Glory. It's a macrocosm of the individual stories we encounter: *He turned the water into wine. In the little Cana town, the word went all around: he turned the water into wine.*

Cash goes on to do almost exactly what the Gospel writer John did, to tell stories about Jesus and the signs he wrought in order that people might draw some conclusions about who he must be. *He fed the hungry multitudes...he walked on the sea of Galilee...* These stories do same thing: they use these signs to point to who Jesus is. Of course, the way John tells the stories about Jesus, the details he chooses to include, all tell us something about who John believes that Jesus is. There is some scholarly dispute about how this particular story came to be in John and nowhere else, but in the end - in the end, the point of the story remains simple: *He turned the water into wine.*

So, what does it matter whether or not Jesus was able to upgrade the festivities at what was probably a distant cousin's wedding? Why do we care if there was or was not a miracle that saved the host of a party from potential embarrassment? I haven't seen any signs lately that would cause me to cast my lot with John in sitting back and recounting the stories of Jesus that tell us about who he is, and perhaps more trying, tell us about who he wants us to be.

Sometimes an image becomes associated with a particular text, sometimes a preacher captures a turn of phrase that recasts a story in such a way that bridges a couple of millennia of understanding so that we, those of us trying to know who Jesus is so that we can know how Jesus wants us to live, can learn something from it. Several years ago, it came in vogue to preach about this text from the standpoint of when the wine runs out. I heard sermon after sermon about when the wine gives out. So I dug around and

came across an old sermon from Dr. William Ireland, a Baptist minister in Atlanta, who looked at this text and realized that if we think about it long enough, consider what our lives look like: What's going on now, for you and me, down the street for our neighbors, sooner or later, the wine runs out for all of us. In his sermon entitled *When the Wine Gives Out*, Dr. Ireland wrote,

“It happens to all of us. The wine gives out, and what is meant to be a joyous celebration soon turns quiet, anxious and empty. Whatever we have relied on to lend order, significance, and joy to our days suddenly runs out or proves woefully inadequate. That's why we need to pay attention to what Jesus did here. He commanded the servants to take six stone water pots used for the cleaning of utensils and the washing of hands, and to fill the jars with water, right up to the brim. He then commanded that some be drawn out and taken to the steward or the headwaiter. When this man took a sip, it was not water, but fine wine. Water had become wine.

Why does it matter? Jesus' turning water into wine is itself a picture of all that he came to do. Jesus took what *is* and said it has the possibility to *become* something else. *What is can become something else*. Just what you have on hand can be the main ingredient in the chemistry experiment he wants to work in your life. What is – whatever is tired, worn out, devoid of joy, empty and lacking in purpose – can be turned into something else. Something rich, fragrant, and ripe with the fullness of joy. What is, no matter how lifeless and stagnant, can be turned into something else by the power of Jesus.”¹

Do you see that? Do you see that what Jesus did thousands of years ago still has the power to turn water into wine today?

Let me ask that another way...are you tired enough, worried enough, sick enough, scared enough to think the wine has given out?

Or maybe it's just the boredom is getting to you. Spiritual mediocrity can be just a soul killing as the worst of what we do. Life isn't miserable, nothing is terribly wrong, it just isn't *joyful*. Is that where you are today? Has the wine been cheap for a long time...adequate enough, but just not really lighting your fire? Kind of like a jug wine, a little vinegary, tastes like the plastic, plastic world.

He turned the water into wine. Of course, I can't prove that. But it's what the Bible says. It's who John says that Jesus was...concerned with life, and joy, beauty, and happiness...

Life, joy, beauty, happiness...do you *know* that is what Christian faith is concerned with? Do you know that is what *God* wants for us? I know it may come across as

¹ Ireland, William. *When The Wine Gives Out* in The Library of Distinctive Sermons. P283
Emphasis mine.

something of a stretch at times...one of my favorite quotes is that Presbyterianism, which I might add, I love, Presbyterianism can be defined as the nagging, horrible fear that somebody, somewhere, is having a good time. Now that's not the faith we are called to!

Life, joy, beauty, happiness...That's what God made us for, wants for us. That the church has come to be associated with deprivation, dourness – a general lack of fun may represent a lack of imagination on the part of some Christians, but it doesn't represent a lack of grace on the part of the gospel. There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and Jesus turned the water into wine. This is the good news we get to share with the whole world that craves/needs/seeks joy and happiness.

Now, about that hundred gallons of wine: That's a conservative estimate. Some scholars do the math and land on about a hundred and fifty. I'm not sufficiently versed in ancient weights and measurements to throw my two cents in on whether it was a hundred or a hundred and fifty, but here's the kicker: *it was a lot of wine*. Wine makes me light up like a Christmas tree but I do still enjoy it and in the corner of our dining room we have a cabinet with a few bottles of wine in it. When that cabinet is full, I think it holds in the order of oh, say, twenty-five bottles. (I didn't go count.) That's maybe four or five gallons of wine. A bottle holds 750ml, and that isn't much wine. The point of all this math is that a hundred, or a hundred and fifty gallons: it's a lot of wine. It's a cellar full. It's at least 250 bottles of wine. In fact, one of the more fanciful interpretations that I encountered on this passage had to do with the very fact that Jesus produced a hundred gallons of wine. I think the preacher disapproved.

But that is the point! Grace, goodness, happiness, joy – it's overflowing. It's more than what is needed. It's the life abundant that Jesus promised.

Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur writes:

*St. John tells how, at Cana's wedding feast
the water pots poured wine in such amount
that by his sober count
there were a hundred gallons at the least.*

*It made no earthly sense, unless to show
how whatsoever love elects to bless
brims to sweet excess
that can without depletion overflow.*

*Which is to say that what love sees is true
that the world's fullness is not made but found*

*life hungers to abound
and pour its plenty out for such as you.*²

But isn't that the point! He changed the water into wine!

But here is the most important part of the wedding at Cana: We're not counting so much on believing that Christ did it so long ago as we're counting on recognizing that he did it yesterday. Or the day before. Or hoping that he is going to do it tomorrow. Because he can. Because he will.

I know the wine gives out sometimes. It'll give out for me, and for you, from time to time. But remember, the Gospel is about new life – life overflowing, blessing from God.

The thing about blessings is that we can't really predict them. When we receive them, they don't tell us so much when they are coming again. And perhaps most frustrating of all, blessings sometimes take a while to identify themselves as such. Or maybe, rather, it takes a while for God to bring a blessing out of some things.

But the Gospel does promise that we will have life abundant and that it will exceed what we can possibly consider imagining.

I sure wish I could tell you for sure what it's going to look like. I can't. You can't. I can only tell you he turned the water into wine. At least the Bible tells me so.

I want to tell you that he is going to turn the water into wine again. And I believe that he is. But I don't want to cheapen that wine, or turn it into some sort of brew-thru, where we claim in fairly superficial discipleship that God's going to bless us and give no thought to how God is going to use us to bless others.

So, I'm not going to cheapen God's blessings by telling you the wine will never run dry for you again. It will, For you, and for me. For all of us some day the wine stops running.

Wherever you are when the wine runs dry, just remember, there is always more water.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Wilbur, Richard. *A Wedding Toast* in Divine Inspiration: the Life of Jesus in Poetry, p113