

“John: The Joy of Great Wine”

Isaiah 25:1-9 • John 2:1-11

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Presbyterians have sometimes been referred to as “the frozen chosen,” and I think for many years that title was well earned. Presbyterians in the past were not exactly known as joyful people. When you look at old photos of church people, they never seem happy. Stern and Presbyterian seemed to go together. Why is that? Well one reason is that, according to the 1839 Presbyterian *Directory for Worship*, joy at church was against the rules.

Here’s how the *Directory* described worship: “Let the people enter the church, and take their seats in a decent, **grave**, and reverent manner.” It goes on to say, “let all the people attend with gravity and reverence...abstaining from gazing about, **smiling**, and all other indecent behavior.” Smiling in church was considered indecent behavior.

But that’s not the picture of the Christian life that we find in Scripture. In Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Joy is one of the “Fruits of the Spirit” in Galatians 5 and Jesus says in John 15, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.” In fact, the word “joy” or “rejoice” is used more than 300 times in the Bible.

I like what the great evangelist Billy Sunday once said: “If you have no joy in your religion, there’s a leak in your Christianity somewhere.” If there is anything that should characterize Christians, it should be joy. As C.S. Lewis famously put it, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” What that means is that joy is God’s idea in the first place because joy is at the heart of God himself. Joy is God’s very nature. You and I will never be able to understand the importance of joy in our lives until we realize how important it is to God. John Ortberg writes that “The Bible puts joy in the nonoptional category. Joy is a command and so joylessness is a serious sin; one that religious people are particularly prone to indulge in.”

Throughout his ministry, Jesus shows us the importance of joy. He loved to be around people who were enjoying themselves, and today’s passage from John is a great example. Jesus was invited to attend a wedding in the town of Cana, not far from his hometown. Weddings are usually joyful times but they are also stressful times. It was no different 2000 years ago. What was different was the level of importance of hospitality.

A wedding in those days wasn’t just an afternoon or evening. The party, which was put on by the groom, lasted an entire week. John tells us that at some point they ran out of wine. This was a huge crisis for this family. It wouldn’t just be embarrassing. They were obligated to provide enough food and wine for the whole week. In fact, they could have a lawsuit brought against them for the failure, it was that serious.

So Jesus’ mother comes to him to get him to help. We don’t know what she had in mind but the way the Scripture reads it sounds like she expected something supernatural. Jesus says, “Woman, what does this have to do with me?” To you and me this sounds terribly disrespectful but in fact when Jesus says “woman,” it’s a term of great respect. He then says, “my hour has not yet come.” What he means is that it’s not time for everyone to know that he is the Messiah. In the gospels, “his hour” always refers to his crucifixion. Mary, however, is confident that Jesus will help and she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do.

As we peel back the layers of this story we discover that it is filled with lots of significant meaning, so let’s look at that. The first thing we want to look at is the jars. As they arrived, every guest would have had to go through a Jewish purification rite. This was a very specific way of ritually washing hands. So now, several days into this party, the jars are empty. Jesus tells the servants to fill them all the way to the brim, which they do. Six jars that each hold 20-30

gallons. Then he tells them to take some out and give it to the caterer. When they dip the ladle in, though, they discover that the jars are now filled with wine.

One of the keys to this story is to know that because these jars are now filled with wine, they could never again be used for Jewish purification. That's the point John is trying to make. Jesus has replaced the empty ritual. It's no longer necessary. Jesus himself fulfills what the ritual pointed to. Empty ritualistic religion does us no good. Coming to church out of a sense of obligation, because it's "what you're supposed to do," is empty. What we need is a relationship with Jesus.

The next thing we need to look at is the wine itself. This is real wine. It's not grape juice. It's not iced tea. Jesus made real wine and it was great wine. Sometimes people will say that they drank wine because the water was not safe to drink. Actually, the water was fine and they drank it often. In the Old Testament, wine was for celebrating. It's a symbol of joy. They considered wine to be a gift from God. Psalm 104 says that wine "makes the heart glad." The rabbis had a saying, "without wine, there is no joy."

We could translate Mary's statement as, "they have no joy." John is telling us what life without Christ is like. Life is hard. Maybe today you have run out of joy. Your boss says they don't need you any more. Your husband wants a divorce. There isn't enough money at the end of each month. Your teenager is in that "phase" and you fight all the time. Your doctor says, "we need you to come in for more tests. You have cancer." Whatever it is for you, you know what Mary means when she says, "they have no joy." That's where Jesus shows up.

I want you to notice two things about this miracle. First is the *quantity*. Jesus doesn't just make enough wine to get through the end of this party. He makes as much as 180 gallons. When Jesus shows up in the midst of your suffering he provides what you need in abundance. He did this often. When he fed the 5,000 with only a

few small rolls and fish there were twelve baskets left over. He provided an abundance. Jesus promises that trusting him will result in abundant blessings in your life. Ephesians 3:20 says that Jesus is "able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think."

Second, notice the *quality*. Beginning in verse 9, "When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.'" I think it's safe to say that Jesus provided the best wine the man had ever tasted. James 1:7 says, "Every good and every perfect gift is from above." God knows how to give good gifts. Jesus will give you the best quality of life if you trust in him.

Verse 11 says, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory." John refers to Jesus' miracles as signs. A sign points us to some reality beyond itself. In this case, the sign of changing water into wine points us to Jesus' identity. Isaiah chapter 24 describes God's judgment on the earth because of the sin of the people. It says, "The Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt." What is the curse? Verse 7 says, "The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh." And then verse 9, "No more do they drink wine with singing." The curse is that they have no wine. They have run out of joy.

But our reading from Isaiah 25 describes God's restoration. Verse 6 says, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined." Jesus' first miracle—turning water

into wine—is a sign. John wants us to see that Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 25. Jesus is the one who brings restoration. He brings back the joy. And he wants to do that for you, too.

So let's get practical for a moment. How can you and I have that kind of joy, the kind Jesus gives that never runs out? First of all, trust him. Verse 11 of our passage says that Jesus' new disciples recognized the sign Jesus had done and they believed in him. Make Jesus an important part of your life. Make him the *most* important thing in your life. If your joy has run out, or it's getting low, take Mary's advice: "do whatever he tells you." What does Jesus tell us? Love God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love other people sacrificially. He tells us to find ways to serve others and to serve alongside others. Where are you currently serving? If you want deep joy, join a ministry and serve in the church and serve people outside the church. If you genuinely start serving other people, I promise you will experience Jesus in a way you never have before and it will bring you great joy.

Second, look up Scripture passages about joy. See what God says about it and meditate on those verses. And third, celebrate. Joy is one of the few things in life that we multiply by giving it away. When we celebrate we build healthier relationships with other people. Make opportunities to practice joy, opportunities where Jesus can show up in your life. In his book on Spiritual Disciplines, Richard Foster says, "Celebration is the result of a consciously chosen way of thinking and living. When we choose this way, the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives and relationships, and the inevitable result will be joy."

My prayer for you is that you would experience the joy of knowing Jesus and that your joy would be contagious.

Amen.