

# "Better Than Expected"

John 2:1-11

January 20, 2013

Second Sunday After the Epiphany

If you were having a party, would you invite Jesus to come? Or, would you feel uncomfortable having Him there? Sure -- if it was dinner or supper, you wouldn't have any problems. We always begin those meals by inviting Jesus when we say that great Lutheran table prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest..." But how would you feel about a party where there was drinking, dancing, and merry-making?

Some would feel uncomfortable in having Jesus physically present where alcoholic beverages were being served because of the notion of some religious groups, based on our history of the temperance movement and our American experiment with prohibition, that alcohol in and of itself is wrong and sinful. Therefore, to drink with Jesus, would be unacceptable.

Others would feel uncomfortable in having Jesus physically present where partying was going on. I once heard it said of the Puritans, the strict religious group who settled in Massachusetts in the 17th century, that their greatest worry was that somewhere, somehow, someone was having fun. There was a time in America where fun was suspect and considered possibly sinful, probably wrong, and certainly a waste of time because, after all, "idle hands are the devil's workshop" it was said. For people who think that way, to have Jesus physically present would be a very serious, possibly somber occasion. To party with Jesus would seem almost blasphemous.

Yet what do we find in our Gospel reading for today? Jesus is invited to a wedding in Cana. Now, if you think that present day wedding receptions are wild celebrations that last for a long time, they don't hold a candle to 1st century Jewish weddings. Those wedding celebrations lasted up to a week and included feasting, dancing, and drinking plenty of wine (not grape juice, but fermented, alcohol-containing wine). And you know what? Jesus went and participated in this joyous occasion.

However, the joy of this occasion was diminished when the wine ran out. This lack of joy was for two reasons. First of all, let's be honest, drinking wine and other alcoholic beverages makes one feel good and joyful. Is that wrong? While the Bible plainly condemns drunkenness as wrong and sinful, it does not condemn the good feeling that drinks, such as wine, produce. In fact, the Bible says God intended for it to be that way. In Psalm 104, it says, He brings "forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart." Without wine, the festive feeling of this wedding celebration would be damaged.

Secondly, the joy of the wedding couple and their families would vanish as they committed the great social blunder of not being able to adequately provide food and drink for their guests. Their great joy would turn to great social embarrassment because of it.

It is interesting what Jesus does. There are no sermons on abstinence or the evil of drink. Instead, Jesus does what may be surprising to some people today: Jesus changes ordinary water into wine. And He doesn't just make a little. Jesus creates an abundance of wine. He fills six stone jars that each hold from twenty to thirty gallons. He also doesn't create a generic, tasteless wine to "get by". He makes superb wine. In fact, it is so superb that the master of the banquet is surprised at its taste, since the usual practice was to serve the best wine first and, when guests had drunk so much that they were...shall we say..."less discriminating" in their tastes, the cheap wine was brought out.

Why did Jesus do this? It almost seems to be a frivolous miracle. There was no dire need, no hurt or pain, no emergency, but simply an occasion where people, celebrating in a God-pleasing way, would have been hindered and embarrassed by a shortage of wine. Jesus' response indicates that God is concerned with our joy in this life. He is not just a God of the spiritual as we often make Him, as if material things were inherently evil, but He is also a God of the material which He created as good for us to take pleasure in. Although we are not to seek the pleasures of this life as all-

important, we know that He is concerned with our enjoyment of life and will provide what we need to live for His glory.

But there is more to it than just this. What Jesus did here is referred to as a "sign". A sign does not exist for itself but to point to something else. For example, if you go out to the Interstate and see the sign that says "Helena – 89 miles", you don't pull your car off to the side of the road to admire the sign, take pictures of it, and focus your attention on it. Rather, the sign points you to Helena so that you can arrive safely there.

In the same way, Jesus turned the water into wine as a sign -- to point beyond the wine to something else. Our text says that, by it, He revealed His glory as the mighty Messiah, a Messiah who came to bring joy.

Like the people at the wedding at Cana, we have a problem with sadness. Only the sadness is not limited to lack of wine, but is something which permeates our entire lives. Sadness exists in this world, not because God intended for it to be, but only because we have turned away from God's good and joyful plan for our lives. The Ten Commandments exist, not to burden us with rules and spoil our fun, but to show us how we are to live in a joyful relationship with the God who created us, as well as a joyful existence with the people around us whom God has also created.

When you violate God's commands, joy is gone and sadness rushes in to take its place. When you violate the Commandments regarding your relationship with God - for example, when you have another "god" before Him, when you misuse His name, or when you do not take time to worship and read His Word, you cut yourself off from Him, the source of all that is good and joyful. You may not know that you are separated from God and lack joy because of it. You may just have a vague feeling of unhappiness or dissatisfaction.

More obvious, perhaps, is the sadness that comes when we violate God's Laws concerning our relationships with one another. When children do not love, honor, and obey their parents, there is no joy in a home, but sadness and conflict. When you hurt your neighbor, physically or by your

words, there is no joy between you. When a marriage is violated, there may be short term pleasure, but no lasting joy for anyone involved. When property is obtained by theft, robbery, deceit or fraud, there is no joy for the victim and no lasting sense of satisfaction for the perpetrator. And when you are coveting - jealously desiring - that which God has not seen fit to place in your possession, how can you possibly experience anything but jealousy and envy? You will certainly not experience joy.

Jesus is revealed today as the Messiah who came to restore joy. Creating wine out of water is only a tiny example of how He would do that. His main job was to do away with the cause of joylessness at the source. By offering His life on the cross as the perfect, all encompassing sacrifice for sin, He restored your relationship with a loving God. The enmity, strife, and barrier between you and Him are gone. His anger over sin, judgment against sin, and condemnation of sin have been taken out on Jesus instead of you. There is peace between you and God. And where there is peace, there is joy.

That joy filters down into our relationships with each other. God's love in Jesus Christ breaks down the barriers that exist among us, as well, especially here in the Church. The Church is to be a community where sinners meet God to receive forgiveness and reconciliation from Him, no matter how serious or how numerous the sins might be.

The Church is a place where newly forgiven sinners can share that forgiveness and reconciliation with each other, no matter how serious their sin or how numerous the sins. We live in a community where joy can abound, not necessarily because we have all of our material desires satisfied, but because we have had the deepest spiritual desire satisfied. We are right with our God and, through that, we are right with one another. Therefore, we live in love and joy with God and we live in love and joy with each other.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead is a sign that points us to future joy which is better and which lasts longer. In the Bible, heaven is pictured, not as a solemn place where people do religious things nor as one eternal church service, but as, of all things, a wedding celebration. Two of Jesus' parables

deal with wedding banquets. The Book of Revelation, in speaking of heaven and the joy that is there says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" (Rev. 19:9) This is not a wedding reception like we know it - cake and coffee at the parish hall and maybe a dance at the country club. This is a wedding feast along the lines of a Jewish celebration - feasting, dancing, and joyfully celebrating, not for an evening or even a week but for all eternity. We get a foretaste of that feast on a regular basis at our altar where Jesus does not change water into wine, but, with wine, gives His blood and with bread gives us His body. We receive His forgiveness, experience His presence, and celebrate His love, knowing that this will only get better when we reach the wedding supper of the Lamb in heaven where we will need no forgiveness, be in His direct presence, and feast on His love forever.

When the disciples saw Jesus' revelation of His glory in this instance, our text says they put their faith in Him. As you face situations in your life that don't always seem happy, put your faith in Christ and hold on to the joy that comes from peace with God and peace with one another. Come to church, not out of a sense of religious duty, but to experience that joy as you gather around His Word and His Sacrament. When you leave, don't let yourself be sucked into the joyless existence that traps so many people in our world. Instead, look forward to the eternal joy that is to come with eagerness and expectation.

At the beginning of the sermon, I asked you if you were having a party, would you want Jesus to come? That is not only an irrelevant question (because Jesus is present wherever we are), but it is also the wrong question. The right question is: if Jesus were having a party, would He want *you* to come? The answer is Jesus *is* having a party, He wants you to be there, and, by all that He has done as Messiah, He has made sure you will be there. So, celebrate the joy we have now in our preliminary "party" here every Sunday and wait eagerly - the eternal party is yet to come. Amen.