

I was in Princeton on Study leave one time when I found that my program had scheduled a lecture for my colleagues and me from Dr. Clifton Black, the seminary's new Otto Piper professor of New Testament. Any time you have a named job, that's a big deal. Dr. Black wasn't at Princeton when I was in Seminary there, so I was looking forward to hearing him and seeing what sort of direction the New Testament department is heading. I was just a touch surprised, skeptical even, when I read his lecture topic. It was Johnny Cash. You may imagine then that I was just a touch concerned about the future direction of my alma mater, but I had read about Dr. Black's work connecting the Gospel and Johnny Cash in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* so I decided to leave the jury out until I heard what he had to say. In the spirit of full disclosure I'm not a huge country music fan either, so the prospects seemed just a touch bleak, to say the least.

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 horizons just a bit, and hopped in my car and drove down Quakerbridge Road over 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 the 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.”

Naturally, when I began to consider our text for this day, the wedding in Cana of Galilee, my mind raced back to the Johnny Cash album, and my cerebral jukebox began to play *He turned the water into wine* over and over and over. Continuous loop.

I’ve done a fair amount of reading on this passage, scholars have weighed in a fair amount 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, really, that he turned the water into wine.

John's gospel narrative is distinctively organized into a predictable pattern, I've told you, 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. I've talked about this before, so those of you who are familiar with John's structure, just bear with me while we review this. 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 is perhaps more of a biblical interpreter than he planned to be, though, in penning this song, because he 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: *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.

As I was reading, I came across a Baptist preacher who was here in Atlanta, a Dr.

William Ireland, 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.

What's the significance of this? 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, old enough, worried enough, sick enough, scared enough to be ready to think the wine has given out?

Or maybe not. Maybe just the boredom - mediocrity of it all - is getting to you. Life isn't miserable, nothings 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 not 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...

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

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 something of a stretch at times...another 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. That's not the faith we are called to.

Life, joy, beauty, happiness...That's what God made us for, wants for us. That church has come to be associated with deprivation, dourness – a general lack of fun represents 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. There is work to be done by Christians to share this good news with the whole world that craves, needs, seeks joy and happiness, but the work doesn't diminish the joyfulness of it all.

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 weighs 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 still enjoy it and in the corner of my breakfast room, because it's out of direct sunlight where I store the bottles that I have bought for myself and that others have bought for me. 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: 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 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 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 not to abound/ and pour its plenty out for such as you.²*

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

If you are wondering if that is, in fact, the point of the sermon, well yes, it is. But 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, and from time to time these elders and deacons will feel it. But 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.

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

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 useless discipleship that God's going bless us and give no thought to how God is going to use us to bless others.

And I'm not going to cheapen God's blessings by telling you the wine will never run dry 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, he turned the water into wine.

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