

## “Stale Water and Old Jugs”

I had four lively college-roommates. After being out of seminary for almost a year, one of them called and asked if I would perform his wedding. Of course I was honored. After I had agreed, Bobby asked me how many weddings had I performed. “Yours will be the first,” I responded.

The wedding was at Wieuca Road Baptist Church, a prestigious church one block from Lenox Square, an upscale shopping mall in Atlanta. I was more nervous at that wedding than at any other I have ever performed. First wedding. Big church. First exposure as an ordained minister in front of my college roommates and other friends. I pronounced them husband and wife, the wedding party recessed, and then I dismissed the congregation to the reception. I was relieved. It was finally over. I had gotten through the ceremony and may have been more nervous than the groom. I plopped down in an exhaustive fashion on the altar and heard an unwelcome sound. Rip. The seat of my pants ripped from one end to the other. I had to wear my robe during the entire reception.

Weddings are festive events, filled with emotion. This morning, I want us to focus on the initiation of Jesus’ public ministry, the wedding at Cana of Galilee.

A wedding feast was one of the most important and joyous occasions in the life of a Jewish family. Since marriages were usually arranged well in advance, the tiny village of Cana in Galilee may have eagerly anticipated this celebration for a long while. The marriage celebration lasted seven days; after the ceremony, the couple went to their home and the celebration continued there in an open-house fashion. (William Barclay. The Gospel of John, vol. 1. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975. p. 97) Cana was just nine miles from Nazareth, the town where Jesus had grown up. The married couple is unnamed, but the event was significant.

Weddings are always momentous occasions, because they join together a man and woman in matrimony. Later, Jesus called this union “one flesh.” I am intrigued that Jesus chose a wedding to inaugurate his public ministry. He had just called six Galileans to be his first followers; they joined him at the wedding feast. The miracle was not performed against the backdrop of some great occasion or in the presence of vast crowds. Jesus did not *officiate* at the wedding; he was simply a *guest*. His mother must have known the family well for she felt responsible for the wine-less dilemma, and she possessed enough authority for the servants to obey her wishes.

But the focus of the passage is not so much on the *miracle*, as it is on the *miracle-worker*. Crowds of people had come and gone. Well-wishers had arrived to celebrate and had returned to their homes. Everyone in the village knew of the wedding, yet only the servants and the disciples knew of Jesus’ miracle. The master of ceremonies tasted the wine and then applauded the family for bringing the good wine out later, contrary to acceptable custom. Yet he, along with the families, was unaware of what had transpired.

*First* impressions are memorable. We like to say that we can’t judge a book by its cover, but we often size up a person by our *first* encounter. Jesus’ *first* miracle was to communicate a strong message. The beginning of his ministry would set the stage for the future. Because of the *miracle*, the disciples put their faith in him.

Jesus wasn’t out to thrill the *masses*. *Miracles* get people’s attention, but it is *faith* that keeps us believing. We do not experience life-changing miracles everyday, but grace is bountiful, if only we receive it.

Let’s take a look at those water jars. Six, big, stone water jugs which would hold between 20-30 gallons. Are you familiar with the biblical symbolism of the number six? It represents incompleteness. Six days did not *complete* a week; God chose seven, which is the number of completion. It wasn’t accidental nor coincidental that six, big, stone water jugs stood nearby. So if the number six represents incompleteness, what was incomplete? The religion of the day. Jesus did not

come to *abolish* the Law but to fulfill it. The Law was intended for good, but humanity manipulated it as constraining.

Biblical commentator William Barclay tells us that the water in these jars had two purposes. First, it was required for cleansing the feet on entry to the house. The roads were dirt. Sandals were merely a sole attached to the foot by straps. On a dry day, the feet were covered in dust, and on a wet day, they were soiled with mud. The water was used to cleanse them. Second, it was required for hand-washing. Strict Jews washed their hands before a meal and between each course. If it was not done, the hands were technically unclean. (*Ibid.*, p.98)

The Jews were big on cleansing and ritual. Cleanliness was next to godliness; some even equated the two. The water was to clean the outside of the person. *Dirty* hands and *dirty* feet made a *dirty* person in the minds of the strict Jews. Their religion was an *outward* display; their theology of works was thought to bring them salvation. They thought their disciplined performance made them right with God. Their deeds were to be as righteous as their hands and feet were to be clean. Religious acts such as fasting were encouraged to exemplify that a person was set apart as a follower of God. Sacrifice was another outward act to restore one's relationship. The Jewish religion was focused on the exterior.

But Jesus came to show us a more excellent way. Jesus came so that we could live by *grace*; seeking to satisfy every jot and tittle of the law was an impossible task.

The ceremonial jugs either contained stale water or were empty. The religion of the day was stale and void. The *traditions* of Judaism had inhibited the *life* out of religion. The *showiness* of the rituals had *harnessed* any vibrance. The *shackles* of the Law had *squelched* the joy. More emphasis was placed on not *doing* something than on *loving* others. Jesus represented newness and vitality. Earlier in John's gospel he wrote, "In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity."

How is your life like one of those old jugs? How have you allowed *your* religion to become stale and void? What *traditions* have you idolized? What *rituals* have you declared divine? Certain lifestyles can shackle us to unhealthy habits. Where do you need Jesus to turn the *stale* water into *new* wine? Where do you need Jesus to make a change? Remember in the biblical text, Jesus did not automatically turn the water in the existing stone jars into wine. He sent the servants to get new water which *became* wine. If we want Jesus to help us, *we* have to be involved too. We are active participants in the process of change; otherwise, there *is* no personal change. Where do you need to see the water turned into wine in your life right now?

Are you struggling with staleness in your personal life? How do you feel about yourself? How is that self-esteem? Got the blahs, feeling worthless or useless? Is your confidence fading because of a present difficulty?

How about your home life? Are you failing to see the gift of your family because you have allowed yourself to be a slave to tasks? Not finding enough time for your spouse? Children? Maybe you need Jesus to turn *your* stale water into new wine.

What about your job? Feeling pushed, pressed, or overloaded? Ever wonder why there are only 24 hours in a day? Finding difficulty in completing your routine tasks because of additional duties? Feel like your *plate* is too full and your *cup* is overflowing? Maybe Jesus can provide you with wine that will bring you zest for living.

How is your health? Needing some encouragement because of nagging ailments, pending tests, or recent diagnosis? Feeling worn out, used up, drained and out of energy? Jesus said, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden down, and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me now, for I am gentle and low in heart."

How is your *mental* health? Finding yourself more blue than in recent memory? Battling skeletons in your psychological closet? Are you like an old, stone, empty jug? Are you dragging a

certain painful memory behind you simply because giving it up would require you to change? Allow Jesus to fill your cup with grace.

Finally, how is your *spiritual* life? Do you find God's presence elusive? Are you lonely and question if your prayers make it past the ceiling? Are you an empty jug whose dryness longs for the freshness of vibrant spirituality that can only come from God above?

Turning the water into wine was an event that occurred more than two thousand years ago. Yet that miracle is indicative of what can transpire if we allow Jesus an opportunity. The water used for cleansing *became* celebrative. The party continued, *because* Jesus turned the water into wine. The wedding celebration in Cana was coming to a screeching halt, because there *was* no more wine. The dilemma was critical.

In the scenarios I have mentioned, how would you describe your situation in terms of the biblical text? For you, has the wine run out completely? Have you simply lost your zeal for living and your zest for life? Some may know that new wine *is* available, but you still refuse to drink it. Fear may prohibit you from risking change, because the present, although painful, is more comfortable and familiar than the future. Some may even claim to have tried the new wine yet think nothing happened. If I expect God to take me as an old jug and fill me with new wine, yet not be involved in the process, then I have shirked my responsibility and forfeited my birthright of soul competency. As an individual, *I* am responsible before God, and God cannot *make* me do anything. I have a *choice*, and if nothing has happened after trying the new wine, then the blame is not with the wine. The grace of God can only *change* us, if we *allow* it.

And still others may be skeptical that the new wine is any better than the stale water in the old jug. Some are so accustomed to stale water that new wine is not even a consideration. Some are so locked into the protection of the status quo, the conserving of the *now*, that new wine represents change, so they continue to sip stale water. Stale water eventually becomes contaminated. I encourage you to choose Jesus' new wine over the stale water.

Martin Luther was struggling in his decision whether to continue in law school as his father desired or to become a monk in order to crush the religious upheaval that plagued his soul. When he was knocked down in a thunderstorm by a bolt of lightning cracking in the sky, the decision was made. It would be the life of a monk.

Martin struggled in the monastery to meet the demands of a holy and wrathful God. He thought the best method was to observe diligently all the basic components of the monastic life. Initially, this approach brought much contentment, for Martin's religious nature thrived on the life of meditation and devotion. There was prayer seven times a day, contemplation, manual labor, and study. All looked well until he was confronted with a thunderstorm of the spirit: his first mass.

Martin's father, still displeased with him for leaving law school, was present. As the service began, all went well until he reached the words, "We offer unto thee the only true God." Suddenly, Martin was struck by God's majesty and wrath. How could he, a *sinful* man, address a *holy* God? With trembling hand and terrified heart, he completed the service only to face his father who delivered the final blow.

The father denounced Martin and the monastery for his son's failure to honor his father and mother. Martin asserted in self-defense, "But Father, I was called of God in the thunderstorm!" To which his father replied in words that haunt many a minister: "God grant that your call was not an apparition of the devil!" In this experience, the security of the monastery was destroyed, and the inner struggle intensified.

Martin tried other methods of achieving spiritual security: solitary study, pilgrimages to holy places, and reliance on the church, but none of them brought peace. Security came when he quit depending on himself or others and trusted solely in the amazing grace of God. We are made righteous

in God's eyes by trusting faith in God's grace, by allowing our stale water to be turned into new wine. (A Cloud of Witnesses. Doug Weaver, ed. Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1993. p. 66-67)

The first sign of Jesus' ministry was to make empty, ceremonial jugs alive with celebration. That is certainly the first miracle that God wants to perform for us personally. When we accept the grace of God, we as empty, old jugs become filled to the brim with the newness of God's love. But grace is not offered only once. If we only received grace at the time we accepted Jesus as our Savior, then we would be bound to the Law, meaning we would *have* to be perfect. God's grace allows us to be forgiven again and again. Accepting the grace of God brings a *change* in us, and that change requires an *effort* on our part. Accepting that grace means allowing the love of Jesus to influence our decision-making, even the living of our lives.

Is your old jug empty? Half-empty? Half-full? Or filled to the brim? I invite you to find refreshment from the grace of God. Life is meant to be celebrated. Thanks be to God for that unspeakable joy.