

# *The Best is Yet to Come*

*John 2: 1-11*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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There is little more embarrassing than running out of food or drink when you're hosting a party. You frantically try to slice the meat with such artistry that tiny portions look normal because you miscounted the number of people who would be coming. You rummage desperately in the closet for the bottle of wine given to you by great Aunt Agnes and pray that it's not quite the rot-gut you know it to be. You can't believe you forgot to think about appetizers and hope that a thimbleful of stale peanuts served on the tiniest plates from your cabinets will appear to be just helping everyone keep their New Year's diets.

That's all pretty bad, but to run out of wine at your own wedding, when wine is what was expected by the entire culture around you? Social suicide. Can't you hear the in-laws, "I told you he was no good for her. That family never amounted to anything. Why he can't even afford this party!"

Wedding feasts in the days of Jesus could last a week. They were huge events in the life of the village and in the life of the families. One commentator has suggested that guests were expected to bring a gift of wine when they came. When Jesus came with his disciples, they may not have brought the anticipated contribution, causing the whole supply to run short. Whatever the reason, the situation was dire, and Mary, Jesus' mother, was sufficiently close to the hosts that she went to Jesus with her problem: "They have no wine."

Just this statement gives us wonderful insight into the culture and family life of Jesus. Mary doesn't actually ask him to do anything. She just lets him know what the situation is. They have no wine. Sort of like saying, "The garbage can is full." Or "Your bed is not made. The yard is covered with leaves." The request is implied.

Jesus got the message and replied, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." Now we have to recognize immediately some problems in translation. This reply sounds to my ears rather rude. If I said to one of my children, "The dishes are in the sink," and they reply, "Man, what's it to me?" I'd sniff rebellion. But using the word for "woman" was customary and polite, not rude. The expression is literally "what to me to you" and is really a less direct,

more polite way of saying, “I’m not sure I can do anything about this.” Jesus said his *hour* had not yet come. His hour, as we read through John, will be the hour of his being lifted up on the cross, the hour of his deepest pain that is his highest exaltation, the hour of worldly rejection of God by men that becomes the very way God will embrace humanity. But his hour can also mean the beginning of his public ministry that will lead to his death and resurrection. We see here that while Jesus desires to respond to human need, he moves not at the will or initiative of any person, not even his dear mother, but by the word of his Father. The relationship between Jesus and his Father is the secret heart of the entire gospel.

Mary, though, knew her son. And she knew something about trusting the Father’s will and timing. So she said simply to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” She stated her need and she declared her trust, then she let it go. Mary, perhaps, was deeply in touch with her Father in heaven. For it seems that indeed Jesus is prompted to begin his public ministry in that hour.

He instructed the servants to fill to the brim the six stone jars that contained water for the Jewish rites of purification. Ritual washings were prescribed in the Scriptures for cleansing after contact with dead things. And they were prescribed for the priests before entering the house of God. But in the ensuing years, ritual washings had expanded to include all manner of cleansing the hands before eating. The water for purification was a way of getting right, of getting back to even after being exposed to the soil and sin of the world.

Now I know something about hand washing. Everyone on my mother’s side of the family was Dutch Reformed. We believe in hand washing. We believe in predestination, too, but that doesn’t mean the chosen ought to have dirty hands. In fact, clean hands are one proof that you’ve been elected. All I have to do is look at a hospital and I need to wash my hands. Washing gets you back to normal after you get thrown off by bumping into the masses of the great unwashed.

Sociologist and author David Brooks presents a different slant on this getting back to normal in his book *Along Paradise Drive*. He suggests that the concept of *par* in golf is actually the great goal in American suburbs. We want to be even, to be in perfect balance. Busy but not stressed. Affluent but not ostentatious. Consuming in the right new restaurants but never getting too fat, taking the right vacations but not appearing too far in debt. That’s why, Brooks says, we scurry to get our trash cans in from the street. Empty cans upset the par of the neighborhood just like long grass, too many leaves, or, perish the thought, an over-display of Christmas lights. Ritual purification is not only about religious hand washing. We

live under a host of codes concerning fashion, spending, décor and manner which tell us whether we are living right, on par, or not right and out of balance.

In this first miracle, Jesus decided to upset the par of the culture. He was going to declare by his actions that the water of ritual purification was no longer needed. The current way of making oneself right in the world, right before God, was going to be replaced. He turned the water of purification into the wine of a wedding celebration. The eternal God had married himself to human flesh. Getting right was now in relationship to him, not through washing hands. We won't be needing those jars of water. They might as well become the wine of a wedding feast. Now the dwelling of God is with men. Our God has come to us. He himself is our peace, our rightness, our wellness, our very life.

Alice had lived a rich life. She had a keen intellect and a sophisticated sensibility. She worked for Stanford University organizing trips around the world for wealthy alumni. Alice had been to the finest museums, dickering with professors over the latest interpretations of DaVinci or Picasso. In the evenings she knew her way around a wine list. She knew her way around a conversation about politics and economics or music and drama, always in a way that made her crowd feel smart, a cut above the masses. She was not raised in church, and generally considered church people to be ignorant of the real world, mired in superstitions and bigotry.

Then one day, the wine failed. Colon cancer. Radical surgery. Chemotherapy to which she had a violent reaction. She called an old friend from her twenties, from halcyon days in San Francisco in the seventies. She called Patty Williamson. Patty is married to a pastor named Parker Williamson, a guy who grew up here at First Pres in Baton Rouge. Parker was the pastor in Lenoir, NC before I was. Years ago, Patty recovered the faith of her upbringing. Patty and Parker invited Alice to come and stay with them while recuperating.

She came with her dismissive questions, the ones that usually silenced religious types. Alice found people who weren't put off by her questions but had actually asked the same ones and found an adequate response in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. She came convinced of the bigotry and selfishness of Christians. She found a community of believers giving their lives for others. Alice went with Patty and another elder as they cared for their Hospice patient, a woman dying, of all things, of colon cancer. She saw the faith they shared. She heard the prayers. She felt the love.

Alice came to church from time to time and listened to the gospel. She realized that the Word is as intellectually stimulating as any system of thought in the world. She asked her questions and received replies laced with love. I remember how, when her sophisticated front had left with her health, Alice was stunned to think that the eternal God would find her significant. She felt that in all her upscale living she had never done anything that mattered. How could it be that she actually mattered to God? But as she was taken into the home and life of this extraordinary couple, she began to believe. She heard their prayers together in the morning; she saw the uncommon love that bound them; she felt them open that faith and love to her.

There was no overtly dramatic conversion and there is no miracle finish to this story. Alice went back home to California. The cancer returned. The wine of this life continued to fail. But quietly, very quietly, Alice had begun to drink of the wine of the Kingdom of Heaven. She began going to church. She wrote to me of her trust that God loved her and that she knew this through Jesus. Alice died. But for her everything had been transformed. All the old ways of rightness—the art, the dining, the travel, the money—had been shown to be just old stale water in stone jars that never really did anything to make any one all right. But she was being made right by the new wine of Jesus Christ. Life was not lost. The best was yet to come.

Jesus comes and transforms life. He comes to all the ways people have tried and failed to be fulfilled, to be right in themselves and before God, and exceeds our wildest hopes that everything gets made new. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5: 17). Under his influence, some forms of our life get replaced with others. Spending habits change. Time use habits change. The way we look at others changes. We go from being consumers of people to lovers of people. We become givers instead of takers.

When the wine failed, Jesus turned the old water into exquisite new wine. The master of the feast, who knew not the source of the wine, praised the bridegroom, the host of the party, for saving the best wine until last. Jesus came into the world changing everything around him. At this wedding miracle, Jesus’ disciples would have thought of something the prophet Isaiah said. The days of the Messiah would bring in a feast of rejoicing. Isaiah said,

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.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples,  
The veil that is spread over all nations.  
He will swallow up death forever,  
And the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces...  
It will be said on that day, "Behold this is our God;  
We have waited for him that he might save us.  
This is the LORD; we have waited for him.  
Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (Isaiah 25: 6-9).

With the wedding at Cana, Jesus launched the great days when cleanses sin and overcomes death. But those days were just the beginning. For our bridegroom, our host, the Lord Jesus himself, has more still to give us. He has indeed saved the best for last. For one day, the words of Isaiah will be fulfilled completely. Christ will return for his bride, the church. And ignorance will be no more. Estrangement will be no more. Death will be no more. Tears will be wiped away. Rejoicing will resound through the universe.

At the beginning of the New Year, we still believe the best is yet to come. 2019 may bring suffering or triumph, prosperity or struggle in our daily lives. But we know that Jesus will return to set all things right. We know that as we partake of him in faith, he makes us part of his mission to the world. Our little lives get taken up into the significance of his mighty work on behalf of all people. We become part of Christ's massive blessing project on this earth. Whatever we do, we now do for his sake, in his name and for his glory. It changes everything. Even repetitive tasks and the duty of drudgery receive the fine wine of significance. For Jesus transforms it all.

In the meantime, we rejoice to keep the feast of his love according to his instructions. We break the bread, knowing that Jesus himself is the bread of life. In his body broken on the cross, we are made whole. In partaking of him by faith, we receive everlasting life. We share the cup, knowing that Jesus himself is the wine of new life. He is living water the slugs our thirst for communion with the Triune God. His blood poured out in waste brings the broken world back to life. His blood cleanses us from every sin. As we partake of him in faith, eating the bread and drinking the wine, we receive the life-giving power of his life coursing through our lives. We become joined as branches to his Vine. We partake of the very love of the Triune God. It is in that faith at communion this morning that we step out of death into life, out of the old into the new, that we venture forth inviting Jesus to transform us and to make us new. For we know that the best is yet to come.