

Tasting God's Love
Rev. Cindy Maddox
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John 2:1-11

My mom was a good cook.

She wasn't a gourmet chef by any means,
and the plethora of cooking shows came a bit too late in her life
to make a big difference in her cooking habits.

But she knew how to bring out the best in foods.

And, oh, she knew how to bake a pie.

I always thought her self esteem was at least partially wrapped up in
her ability to make a tender pie crust.

She enjoyed cooking for her audience,

knowing what people liked so that when we came to visit,
we got our favorite dishes.

I particularly loved my mom's pot roast, meat loaf, and chicken and biscuits.

I have some of her recipes,

or at least as close to a recipe as my mom used when cooking her standards.

Jackie will sometimes make me chicken and biscuits,
and no offense to my wonderful wife who does all the cooking in our house!
But there's something that's not quite right.

I don't *think* my mom would have withheld a secret ingredient
just to make me love hers the most, but I'll never know!

Somehow her chicken and biscuits just tasted like love.

I have Pastor Lauren's permission to share a story about her youngest son Henry,
who had a similar experience.

To start with, you have to know that Henry gets hangry.

If he doesn't have food when he is expecting to get food,
he loses it. Low blood sugar is not his friend!

And it is not the friend of anyone else in the household.

One day Lauren was fixing dinner but was behind schedule,
and Henry got hangry.

He had a meltdown and got mad at his mom and went storming to his room,
slamming his door behind him.

Lauren knew he couldn't wait another 15 or 20 minutes for dinner to be ready
so she quickly sliced an apple and put peanut butter on it.
She gave it to Jonathan and asked him to give it to Henry,
knowing that Henry would accept it better coming from Jon than from her.
So Jonathan took the apple and peanut butter and knocked on Henry's door.
"I have some food for you," he called.
"What is it?" Henry demanded.
"It's an apple with peanut butter."
Henry opened the door a crack. "Who made it?"
Well, Pastor Jonathan did what any parent would do—and he lied!
"I made it!" he assured Henry.
Henry opened the door more, took the plate, and began to eat.
Suddenly he stopped and he looked at his father
with all the accusation he could muster in that cute little face and announced,
"You lied! You didn't make this. Mom did. I can taste her love on it!"

He could taste her love on it.

I don't know what the wine tasted like that day in Cana,
but I think it might have tasted like relief.

The writer of the Gospel of John begins by setting the scene.
There is a wedding in Cana, and Jesus and his disciples are all invited guests,
as is the mother of Jesus, who incidentally isn't named in John's Gospel.
Weddings in that time and place could be week-long events,
the highlight of communal life,
and a memory to cherish.

Or not—if it goes badly.

In this story we are told Mary finds out that the wine has run out.

She knows that at every wedding in the next ten years, someone will say,

"Oh, remember Jeremiah and Esther's wedding, when they ran out of wine?"

Small villages have long memories, and this is a big social faux pas.

But it is more than embarrassing.

As one writer puts it, "Wine is ... a sign of the harvest,
of God's abundance, of joy and gladness and hospitality.

And so when they run short on wine, they run short on blessing."¹

¹ Lose, David. "Learning to Tell Time." www.workingpreacher.org.

Many readers assume that it is the host's fault for running out of wine.

They didn't plan ahead, or maybe they couldn't afford more.

But it is also likely that members of the community were supposed to chip in, bring some to share, help relieve the burden on the host family.²

If this were the case, the lack of wine would not just be embarrassing to the couple, but perhaps even hurtful—

it could be a sign that their community didn't celebrate their union.

We don't know for sure, but either way, Mary doesn't like it.

She doesn't want their wedding to be ruined, so she goes to Jesus and simply says, "Jesus, they have no wine."

She is hoping he'll get the hint and go do something about it.

But instead he says, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?"

It sounds like a rude answer in English, but it was more just dismissive.

It isn't my problem, and now is not the time.

In response, she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do.

It may have been a passive-aggressive mama trick, to guilt him into doing something.

Apparently she has faith that he will do something.

Apparently she has reason to believe he *can* do something,

as though this isn't the first time she has seen him do the miraculous.

Maybe he's been turning water into wine for years at home!

Whatever her motivations, apparently it works.

Jesus instructs the servants to fill six stone water jars with water.

That alone is no small feat.

Each jar held 20-30 gallons,

and they couldn't just uncoil the garden hose and turn on the tap.

Plus, these jars were for ritual cleansing.

They weren't sacred, exactly, but they were special, reserved for a sacred purpose.

But the servants do as they are told, and somehow, Jesus turns the water into wine.

Lots of it. 120-180 gallons of it.

But here's the best part:

It wasn't mediocre boxed wine. This was the good stuff.

And this was the first public act that Jesus performed in the Gospel of John.

His first act wasn't a sermon.

² Harper Collins Study Bible.

It wasn't even a miracle to reduce suffering.
His first public act was to bring abundance,
to save a party.

Now it's important to remember that in John's gospel,
events like this one are not called "miracles" but "signs."
John wasn't concerned about showing us all the miraculous things
Jesus could do.

We aren't supposed to see the miracles for the sake of miracles;
what was important is that they pointed to God,
were revelations of God.

So the outpouring of wine was not a miracle, but a sign—
a sign of God's abundant gift, God's promised redemption.
The disciples recognized the revelation of God in this amazing flow of wine.

And so should we.
But sometimes we reject the wine.
Of course, I'm talking about metaphorical wine here.
There may be good reasons for you to reject real wine,
and alcohol of any kind.
But sometimes we also reject the metaphorical wine God wants to offer.

All around us, God is turning water into wine, and we don't recognize it.
When a relationship is renewed, God has turned water into wine.
When broken hearts are healed, God has turned water into wine.
When we find joy in the midst of despair . . .
When an impossible dream comes true . . .
When the loss of a job leads to a better opportunity . . .
When love catches us by surprise . . .
God has turned water into wine.

They aren't miracles. They're signs.
They point us to God's transforming power.

It begins with sharing our jars.
Just as Jesus told the servants to fill up the water jars,
the containers set aside for a sacred purpose,
so God asks us for our jars, and we say "You want all of them?"

No, no, we need our jars.

We have our lives all neatly planned out.

These jars are for work,
and these jars are for family,
and this jar is just for me,
and that jar over there is for God.

Then God goes and says, “Give me all your jars?” No way.

We need our separation.

We need to divide our work from our religion, or how will we succeed?

We need to divide our bodies from our spirits,
or how will we enjoy life?

We need our jars. We need them to be kept separate, set apart.

We don’t realize—or maybe we forget—that all of our life can be sacred.

Some of us are willing to share our jars,
but then we worry about what happens next.

Turning water into wine?

Ooh, that means change.

And change is scary.

It took us a long time to fill up our jars—our *water* jars—

and what happens if they are used for a different purpose?

Wine will change them—at least temporarily, and possibly forever.

We don’t want to risk what those changes might mean.

We’re fine with water, thanks.

No, it doesn’t taste as good on our tongues, but it’s good enough.

As you know, I grew up in a conservative Christian tradition.

We had “biblical preaching,” and Bible-based Sunday school,

and Wednesday night Bible studies,

but one of the stories I didn’t hear very many Sunday school lessons about
was this story.

Frankly, teetotalers don’t know what to do with this passage.

Some of them try to say it wasn’t really wine like we know wine;

it was more like strong grape juice.

Or they try to explain that the water wasn’t safe to drink,
so Jesus had no other choice.

(But we do, so the standards for us are higher than they were for Jesus!)

But all in all, I always thought they'd be more comfortable
if this miracle were in reverse . . .
if Jesus turned wine into water.

We do that, too—when we deny the sign.
When we try to explain it, figure it out, logic it away,
we're turning wine into water.
When we declare that the extraordinary is ordinary,
we're turning wine into water.
When we deny that God's work in our lives has significance,
we're turning wine into water.
When we take this abundant outpouring of grace and we say, "I don't deserve it,"
we're turning wine into water.

Mary Luti is a UCC minister and former seminary professor.
Recently in the UCC Clergywomen group on Facebook she wrote this:

“After yet another wrenching conversation with a person who believes herself unworthy of Communion (after repeatedly hearing Communion moralized to death by her pastor over the years), and longing for the day when words like these won't need to be said or sung, I offer this hymn.
It was written in Christ's voice as encouragement for people who have been expressly excluded for not measuring up, or who have excluded themselves from the Table with doubts about worthiness. But it encompasses us all, who at one time or another may have felt we did not deserve the gift.”

Here are the words:

*I know you can't believe I love you so.
I know you fear you never will be fine.
I know you think you don't deserve a thing,
but I'm telling you, beloved, you are mine.*

*I want to give you all my hope and joy.
I want to bless your life in every part.
I want to show you how you shine and shine,*

and I'm telling you, beloved, you're my heart.

I know they say this Meal is not for you.

I know too often it has been a test.

*I know you think that you might never pass,
but I'm telling you, beloved, you can rest.*

You are the one this bread is waiting for.

You are the one for whom the wine pours free.

*You are the one whose place I've saved and set,
and I welcome you, beloved, taste and see.*

Come and taste the grace.

You'll know it is from God because you can taste God's love on it.

Come and taste.

Come and drink.

Come and know.