

New Wine Ferments

John 2:1-11

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An elder pointed out last week that our sign may send the wrong message again: New wine ferments Dr. Gareth Icenogle. I have to admit that there have been moments in my life where I've had enough to be a little pickled.

It is important that we realize that in the new beginnings of John, chapter 1, there's a wonderful moment when the first miracle is accomplished by Jesus at a party. It's good to have parties. I became a Presbyterian because they know how to party. My Dad would often remind us as his children that marriage is the only banquet where dessert is served first. Think about it.

Yesterday I was at a wedding in Bethlehem. Standing in front of the couple and having them repeat the vows, there's just those gushy moments where they are looking into each other's eyes and they forget that anybody else is around them. It is a wonderful moment, one of special tenderness. That starry-eyed optimism is eventually confronted, however, with the stone-faced realism of life. Faithfulness in marriage is challenged by the loss of dreams and hard times.

The movement of the gospel begins with the grace of Jesus Christ and the miracles. Jesus turns water into wine. And the wonderful people that experience this are the ordinary ones at the wedding: the servants. The bride and groom don't know what's going on. The steward doesn't know. But Jesus' mother, the disciples, and the servants know that Jesus has done this miracle. The grace of Jesus Christ touches our lives. And because of Jesus' miracle and the grace being poured out, the disciples believe, they trust, that Jesus is the Christ. They are beginning their ministry walk with Jesus and that walk will quickly take them, through John, to a place where things get difficult, complicated, and hard. That grace turns into some grief and loss, but ultimately the grace is resurrected in Jesus Christ and there's that moment of Jesus turning the water into wine, the hard times and the power of the resurrection and new wine. The development and finale. Autumn becomes winter and eventually moves into spring.

The beginnings of the gospel are that Jesus touches us with grace, glory, miracles, healings, and forgiveness. But that inevitably leads us into being tested by grief. The deepening part of the gospel comes with us as we go into the hard and dark places: the challenges and temptations, our failures and frustrations, our disillusionments. It is out of the furnace and fermentation of life that Jesus shows us the way to be tempered and hardened for good.

John, chapter 2, is the moment of grace and glory. That Jesus loved a good party ought to be encouraging.

Jesus provides real wine, not just grape juice. I grew up on a tradition that claimed it was grape juice. I always asked the question though, how did they get drunk on grape juice? I never did get a good answer to that.

Jesus shows grace in listening to his mother but he shows boundaries in saying, well, Mom, this may not be the right time. Jesus saves the best for last. That's prophetic of what's to come, but not until we've gone through difficult times with him. With Jesus the things that look great at first can become grim along the way. The good life can become the hard life; the open way can become the narrow way. The sweet treats can seem like mean tricks. The grace takes us into grief--and through it.

John, chapter 2, is followed closely by chapter 6. If you have an opportunity this week, take some time after reading John, chapter 2, again and spend some time with John, chapter 6. It's a long chapter and it's a painful chapter. Clearly, John wants to deliver a pattern that says, yes, it's wonderful that Jesus comes into our lives and gives us goodness, grace, healing, and miracles, but let's live in reality.

John, chapter 6, is about the disillusionment of the disciples, the deconstruction of the image that Jesus is going to come and make everything okay. After turning water into wine and giving bread to more than 20,000, the people are moved and following Jesus in great crowds. They know Jesus can provide for their every need. He can feed them wonderful things. The crowd becomes rather militant about that in John, chapter 6, saying they would seek him to seize him and take him by force to make him king.

Well, we want this guy to be our leader. The crowd held a mass election and he was elected. But, knowing their intent, Jesus withdrew and began to give some difficult teaching to those who would listen. He said to his disciples, "You were looking for me because you ate your fill. Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures to eternal life. Eat the true bread that gives life. I am the bread of life, the living bread, the bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh." And then he speaks the lines that really drove many disciples away, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

What is this? A cannibal? Someone who calls vampires? The disciples said, in great understatement, "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?" Scripture says many turned away because they'd had it with Jesus, particularly Judas who decided it was a bridge too far. The delight turned to disillusionment, the expectation turned to expiation, the wine becomes blood, the success starts looking like failure, the optimism is rugged realism, the grace turns to grief, the triumph to tragedy, the charisma looks like calamity now. And while followers begin to fall away, Christ starts looking like a criminal and the disciples go into denial, desertion, and betrayal. You see those good grapes, the grapes that God makes, have to be crushed. They have to be fermented in vats for sustained period of time. They have to be racked for several years to be thoroughly aged and that best happens in the dark cold dungeons of the wine cellars of life.

Do you come today and think you are in a wine cellar? You are in a dark place, you are set on a shelf and you are being aged by God whether you want to or not. The new wine ferments. Andrew Greely, a sociologist, is a catholic novelist who has written strong

novels about how life and theology intersect. In a book entitled *Ascent into Hell*, he writes about a Catholic priest who becomes very successful at working the Chicago futures market. His ascent into success and power, with his good looks and charisma, makes him millions of dollars. The more success he has the darker his life becomes. The wealth leads to a loss of faith. The grace leads to a huge amount of grief in his life. It seems to me that we are confronted at this moment in history with the fact that the parties of 2000 have become the anxiety of the unresolved election on Tuesday. The party's over; we must come face-to-face with the hard work of living in the tough places of life.

We love the thrills and the positive feeling and the miracles of success. We want to dwell on the glory of the exuberance of the good times. But Jesus is more than good times; Jesus wants to be with us when times fall apart. He invites us into a heavy dose of reality; then he confronts us in the trouble we have with who we really are. The miracles convince us of the glory so we have the courage to face the gory reality of our depth of brokenness and sin.

Just ask Kobe Bryant if charisma and talent is enough. Does that make for a good team, because one individual has ability? Just ask the NBA dream team that played in the Olympics. Their dream turned into a nightmare. That old good show, individualism, can't compete with hard-nosed team discipline and preparation in the Olympic court. We come to places where the party is over. I heard a story recently of a fellow who was driving through Yellowstone Park. He was in a party mode, and he had a box of graham crackers there on the seat next to him. He saw a brown bear over on the side of the road and, respecting the "Do Not Feed the Bears" sign, he rolled down his window and tossed out some graham crackers. The bear was very interested and took a few nibbles. The man tossed out a few more, and the bear crept toward the car. The guy was having such a good time, he put more out. Then suddenly the bear charged the car. It reached right into the window with its claw and took out that whole box along with a lot of the seat. The guy panicked; the party had turned almost to a tragedy. He was able to get away before the bear did more damage. Sometimes, those fun moments in life can turn into ugly ones.

In 1968 and '69, I read a book that changed my life. I was in college and someone gave me John Keith Miller's book, "A Taste of New Wine." Today more than two million copies have been sold worldwide in ten languages. It has changed millions of lives. I had the fortune of getting to know Keith Miller over the years--a wonderful man. He later wrote a second book that touched my life called, "The Second Touch." The whole lay ministry movement in congregations like ours: Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist around the country was impacted by people whose lives have been changed because they had experienced the new wine of Jesus Christ: Lloyd Oglivie, Bruce Larson, Lyman Coleman, Louis Evans, Jr., Keith Miller.

In 1997 Keith wrote a book that was the culmination of all his books, "The 27th." He tells the story of being in 1976 seated on a hill in central Texas hill country, looking at a 17-foot tall bronze statue of Jesus while the sun came up over the Texas hills. He is sitting on a wooden bench, hugging himself, and sobbing, broken. His body aching after three years of deep conflict and pain, his marriage of 27 years over, his family broken; his vocation as a Christian writer and speaker shriveling up because he was a failure. He tells the story of how his compulsive behavior, how his experience of new wine drove him to over-commit and over-perform because he hadn't had the depth of healing in his life that he needed. And what God was doing when he hit rock bottom was confronting him with the secret of his soul, which is the title of his book.

Today is Halloween. Historically, this is the pagan holiday before the Christian holiday of All Saints Day, November 1. Unless Jesus meets us in the darkness of Halloween, there are no saints for All Saints Day. Unless the ancient fires burn with the powerful Holy Spirit present in the midst of the darkness, the saints that are brought together on the next day will not have the quality of life that they need to have. All Saints Day is a mark that the grapes have been crushed, that the people of God have been fermented. That there's been a heat-treating process to bring to us a place where we're sanctified.

Keith Miller tells the story that after he'd gone through this terrible time of loss, after he'd gone through the Halloween of his life where he met the devil face to face, God brought him to a place of newness. Of another dose of new wine, of resurrection power, where he was no longer controlled by the set of inner voices that shamed him and brought him down. He was now surrounded by a cloud of witnesses that he calls the communion of saints that gathered around him in small groups, who gave him new words and new voices to hear. Positive voices that re-parented him, a heroic cloud of witnesses, cheer leaders who could cheer him on even in the midst of his depression and darkness. You will make it through, Keith, we are praying for you. And he tells the story about the communion of the saints. The people who celebrate All Saints Day, who brought him back to life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a dawn after the darkest moments. There is an All Saints Day after Halloween. The new wine of Jesus Christ that brought in the miracles will mature and bring us to wisdom, depth, and sustaining power. The disciples who sign on, who walk with Jesus through the darkest moments, come out and are gathered again in the resurrection. The easy grace becomes a severe mercy, the severe mercy becomes a majestic resurrection. The treat turns to terror but eventually triumph. Water turns to wine and wine turns to blood and blood flows into powerful spirit that brings us new and eternal life. The Cana wedding is about how Jesus not only brings a special moment of grace at the beginning of the gospel, but how Jesus will bring us to a greater moment of wonder when we celebrate the banquet of the lamb at the end of life in the new life. Jesus will eat with us and have us share new wine in the eternal kingdom.

There is a dawn after a long darkness. Just ask the Boston Red Sox. Who can believe that they could remove the curse of the Babe--that long Halloween experience. By beating the Yankees four games in a row. By winning the World Series, four in a row. There is new beginning in Jesus Christ. If you are going through a rough time in your life and you declare your faith in Christ, Jesus is promising to be with you in the midst of that dark place and to bring you out of it to new wine and new life. He will lead you to a new beginning, a new dawn. Jesus always saves the best for last.

Amen.