

Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible
Part 8: Jesus, the Life of the Party

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Scripture: John 2:1-10; Psalm 104:14-15

I. Places Jesus Wouldn't Necessarily Go Himself

At the close of worship each week, one of the lines of our final blessing goes, "May God go behind you to push you into places you wouldn't necessarily go yourself." Frankly, I'm surprised that in the last ten years that we've offered the blessing, there has never been a movement to remove that particular line. I mean, we're essentially giving God our consent to, well, push us into places we wouldn't necessarily go ourselves! Usually there are reasons why we don't want to go someplace we're being pushed into.

If the line from our blessing makes you nervous, you may find some comfort in knowing that Jesus allowed *himself* to be pushed into places he wouldn't necessarily go himself – the Cross being the preeminent example! In our story this morning where Jesus turns water into wine, however, it's not God pushing Jesus into an uncomfortable place but *his mother*, Mary. Because of her prodding and pushing, Jesus performs the very first miracle in the Gospel of John.

It's a rather interesting story, isn't it? There's this great wedding feast. Everyone has been partying so hard they have literally drained every remaining cask of wine. It's rather amazing that Jesus' own mother would be the one trying to keep the party going. Mary? The one who, at least in popular imagination, is so meek and mild that butter wouldn't even melt in her mouth? *She's* calling for more wine to keep the party rockin'? Yet she pushes Jesus to do something about the wine situation. Jesus seems rather annoyed by her pushing, saying, "What concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Ignoring Jesus' brushoff, she instructs the servants to "do whatever he tells you."

After instructing the servants to fill six stone jars used for the Jewish rites of purification with water, Jesus orders them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward, who tastes the water and openly wonders why they have reserved the very best wine for last.

I sure wish I could pull off a miracle like this! (Don't think I haven't tried ...) I do wonder sometimes, however, what actually happened here. Like, is it possible that Jesus had the servants serve plain water to the chief steward? Having helped everyone drain the wine casks, the chief steward was probably so drunk by then that you could have served him a glass of Cherry Coke and he would have pronounced it "fine wine." Heck, he was probably so dehydrated from all the wine that cool, clear water was what he should have been drinking. He would probably experience a goblet of clear water to be more refreshing than any Lafite Rothschild Bordeaux. No, if Jesus was playing a little "party trick" on the chief steward, serving him water in a wine goblet, the steward's conclusion that the owner had saved the best stuff for last would be right on the mark.

Perhaps this is the point that the gospel writer was trying to make by telling us that the water jars were reserved for the purification rites. According to Jewish law, Jewish brides immerse themselves in a *mikvah*, or ritual bath, before the wedding, followed by a small party for female friends and family. This is still observed to this day in many Jewish communities. In some, the males also take the *mikvah* ritual bath and celebrate with their male friends. So it's no wonder that there were a number of empty water jars used for purification on hand after the wedding.

If it is actually the case that Jesus was playing a trick on the chief steward, having him served water instead of wine, then there may not be some sort of "hocus pocus" miracle here, but rather, a demonstration of Jesus' humor and wisdom. Why wisdom? Because the point he probably would have been making is that inner purity feels a lot better than overindulgence – even at a wedding party. The feeling of being cleansed from sin is far better than being full of wine, even the best wine.

Of course, these days "purity" gets a bad rap. Yes, we may prefer pure air to polluted air, pure water to dirty, and pure motives to impure ones (at least when it concerns others), but we tend to recoil when we hear calls for purity applied to us. Why wouldn't we? When we think of a "pure" human being, we tend to picture Catholic nuns, or people like Jesus' mother, Mary – who we definitely don't expect to be calling for more wine but less. One would have every reason to expect that Mary was about as pure as human beings come. Yet the fact that we expect such a pure soul to be calling for less wine rather than more should tell us that our concept of purity, and God's concept of purity, are two very different things. God's concept of purity must be more fun than ours!

What is God's concept of purity? Well, the ritual bath in our story may give us a significant clue. I've never taken a Jewish ritual bath, but I have certainly taken a lot of nice, deep, soaker baths in my time. I tend to prefer showers, but when life gets particularly hectic and stress is getting the better of me, I draw a hot, deep, bath. Sometimes I sprinkle some mineral salts in the tub while the water's running. I turn the lights down low, lay down in the tub and ... oh, the stresses of the day dissolve as fast as those mineral salts. After 30 minutes or so, I step out of the tub feeling like a new person.

Actually, I don't feel like a "new" person so much as I feel like I've finally found "me" again. The real "me" had been lost under all that stress.

This is what it means to be "pure." It means to regain your true self. Your best self. Purity is to be "in your element." I have a lot more fun when I'm feeling like I'm in my element. Don't you? This is what it means to be "pure" in God's eyes. It means to be "in your element."

If Mary pushed Jesus into playing a prank on the chief steward by serving him water in a wine goblet, and Jesus went along with it because he wanted to teach this lesson about purity by using jars from the Jewish purification bath ritual as containers, I'd say, "Well played, Jesus and Mary. Well played!" I'd also say, "I'm thirsty!"

II. What About Love?

This lesson about purity through "turning water into water" is all well and good, but what if our assumption is wrong? What if Jesus really did turn water into wine? Or at least, what if this whole incident is part of the "mythological imagination" of scripture, trying to teach us not so much about something that happened long ago but about something that keeps happening, over and over again up to our day? What is it that John's Gospel is trying to tell us about Jesus and purity if he turned the water inside the jars used for the *mikvah* purification ritual into wine?

Actually, it conveys the same message as the "water into water" interpretation above, only makes it a hundred times more powerful and joyous. According to our "water into water" interpretation, the lesson of the story is that purity is about being "in your element." It's like taking a long, soaker bath, cleansing away all the dirt, the stress, the frustration and anger and so on, and restoring your sense

of self. Purity is about being able to face the world with peace and grace, engaging your struggles with your best self, not your worst.

This is what the water part of the story represents and what purity means. Being in your element. But here's why we need more than just water in the story – why we need wine, too. You see, being “in your element” – and staying there – isn't easy. It takes a lot more than a long, soaker bath. It takes a constant commitment to cutting out all those things that have nothing to do with keeping you in your element; with being who you are and who you are called to become.

You can't be “in your element” if you're constantly overwhelmed with to-do lists. You can't be “in your element” if you are fighting with your neighbor, your children, your co-worker, or your spouse. You can't be in your element, or stay there for long, if you are constantly doing things that have nothing to do with what brings you alive in this world and brings you peace. And you can't be in your element if you are doing things that block others from being “in their element,” either.

In other words, you can't just do whatever brings you alive in this world and expect to be “in your element.” I don't know about the next Realm, but in this one, being fully *alive* also involves *dying* – dying to those old ways that prevent you and others from living into your fullest self. It means letting go of your to-do list, or certain parts of it, anyway. It means saying “No” to others who ask things of you as often as you say “Yes.” It means putting an end to hating your enemies. It means living at peace with your neighbor, your children, your co-worker, and your spouse to the extent that is humanly possible.

It involves *sacrifice* to live in purity; to live “in your element.” Not a great sacrifice, really, at least in terms of what you are really giving up. What you are giving up is an old way of life in which living “in your element” isn't your highest priority. It means giving up the many masters in order to love and serve the one Master, whose highest desire for you is to live “in your element.”

Given our understanding of purity, and what it takes to live “in your element,” it is no coincidence that wine is the element Jesus turns the water into. The psalms tell us that “wine gladdens the human heart.” (Ps 104:15) The miracle of turning water into an element that “makes the heart glad” – at a wedding party, no less – reminds me that everything we must sacrifice in order to live “in our element” is ultimately for the purpose of making our heart glad.

The wine also reminds me quite overtly about the sacrifice that must be made to get us "into our element." For this first miracle in John's Gospel also points ahead to Jesus' last miracle: turning wine into blood when "his hour" had finally come. Jesus' turning water into wine is a foreshadowing of the Last Supper where the wine is a representation of Jesus' body, shed for us. Only it's not a morose foreshadowing. If anything, the story is meant to remind us that even Christ's dying on the Cross is not an end in itself. The Cross serves an Empty Tomb, not the other way around. Death serves Resurrection, not the other way around.

The message to us is plain and simple in the end: Die to everything that crucifies the human spirit, specifically *your* human spirit so that you can *live* as one who is "in your element" and join the party God has invited you to.