

## Fill My House with Hoping

*John 2:1–11*

### Dry Wedding or Wet Wedding?

As a pastor, I've had the honor of officiating many weddings, and each one has its own unique memories. A few years ago, I officiated a ceremony where the bride and groom seemed especially nervous. You could tell they weren't sure how to carry themselves. When they walked in and stood before me, there was this awkward distance between them, almost like they were standing apart on purpose. And then, the groom's mother, sitting in the front row, gently stood up, walked over to them, and linked their arms together. It was such a small act, but it completely shifted the atmosphere. They smiled at each other, the tension lifted, and suddenly, it felt like a wedding again.

I did my best to make the wedding ceremony meaningful and joyful, but let's be honest—ceremonies are ceremonies. They tend to be formal and proper, as they should be. But what struck me was this: the real wedding celebration truly began when we arrived at the reception. Laughter filled the room, music got people dancing, and there was this joyful energy that just couldn't be contained. Let me ask you: What's one thing that's almost always part of a wedding reception? Alcohol, right? Now, imagine if the celebration had no drinks at all—a “dry wedding.” For many of us in the United Methodist tradition, this wouldn't be a big deal. We're taught to honor God in different ways. While the church doesn't prohibit responsible drinking, it also encourages abstinence as a way to witness to God's love. For us, whether the wedding is “wet” or “dry” is a matter of personal preference. But in ancient Israel, it wasn't that simple.

### Wine and Joy

In Jesus' time, wine wasn't just part of the celebration—it was a symbol of joy itself. Unlike our modern one-day weddings, weddings back then lasted seven days, with the whole community involved. Running out of wine wasn't just inconvenient—it was an embarrassment, a disaster. It was like saying, “The joy has run out.” And in today's scripture, that's exactly what happened.

Now, let's take a moment to reflect on this. Haven't we all had moments in life where it feels like the “wine of joy” has run out? Maybe it's a financial hardship, the loss of someone we love, or a health challenge we didn't see coming. Or maybe it's a quieter kind of emptiness—the feeling that life is just going through the motions without any real spark or joy.

Churches feel this too. When attendance starts to dwindle, when familiar faces move away, when it feels like the next generation isn't there to carry the torch—it's easy to feel like the jars of our community are running dry. In these moments, we often calculate scarcity. We focus on what's missing, what's lacking, and what we can't do anymore. But Jesus doesn't operate on scarcity. When we brace ourselves for the worst, Jesus shows us that the best is yet to come.

### The Six Jars

This is where the story of the six jars comes in. Mary notices the problem and tells Jesus, “They have no wine.” At first, it seems like Jesus is hesitant to get involved, but Mary trusts Him. She turns to the servants and says, “Do whatever He tells you.”

Nearby are six large stone jars, each able to hold about 26 gallons of water. These jars were used for purification rituals—ordinary objects with a practical purpose. Jesus tells the servants to fill them with water, and they do—right to the brim. Then, He tells them to draw some out and take it to the banquet master. And when they brought it to the master of the banquet, the Bible tells us the water had been transformed into 'good wine.' The very first miracle Jesus performed as He began His public ministry was turning about 600 liters—158 gallons—of water into the finest wine.

There are many interpretations of Jesus' first miracle—turning water into wine. Some say that by filling jars meant for ceremonial washing with new wine, Jesus was symbolically transforming the 'order of the law' into the 'order of grace.' Others suggest that when people saw the water turn into red wine, they might have thought of Moses turning the Nile into blood and seen Jesus as bringing a new kind of salvation.

But instead of diving into these deep interpretations, I found myself wondering something a bit more practical: 'How much would the wine Jesus made be worth today?' So, I asked AI, 'If we converted the value of that wine into today's dollars, what would it be?' The answer was fascinating. Assuming a high-quality bottle of wine

costs about \$50 for 750 ml, the 600 liters Jesus made would be enough to fill about 900 bottles. That means the wine could be valued at around \$45,000 in today's terms.

Think about that—900 bottles of excellent wine! Jesus didn't just provide enough; He provided an abundance. And what's even more amazing is that He gave this incredibly valuable gift freely, as if it were nothing. Imagine how the bride and groom, or the master of the banquet, must have felt receiving such a generous gift. I'm sure they were overjoyed and deeply grateful.

## **A Gift Economy**

The miracle Jesus performed wasn't just about turning water into wine—it was a “miracle of abundance.” It was a powerful sign that in God, there is no lack. Think about how our world works. It's built on the idea of scarcity, the belief that resources are limited. This mindset shapes everything we do. When we think what we have isn't enough, what happens? We compete with others to get what we need. And if we lose, it feels like we're being left behind, like we're at risk of falling apart. Survival becomes our focus. Instead of sharing or serving others, we end up clinging to “what's mine” or “what's for my family.”

But John's Gospel reminds us of a different truth: in Christ, there is no shortage. Through the miracle of turning water into wine, Jesus revealed God's overflowing abundance. God's way of operating isn't like the world's. It's not based on transactions or exchanging equal value, like \$2.95 for a gallon of gas or \$18 for a bowl of soup.

God's economy is based on grace, on generosity. It's a gift economy, where abundance flows freely, not because we earn it, but because God gives it. And that abundance changes everything—it invites us to stop clinging, stop competing, and instead, live in the freedom and joy of God's abundance and generosity.

Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes this beautifully in her book *The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance*. She writes: “I accept the gift from the bush and then spread that gift with a dish of berries to my neighbor, who makes a pie to share with his friend, who feels so wealthy in food and friendship that he volunteers at the food pantry.” It's a beautiful picture of how generosity creates more generosity based on the belief in abundance, how gifts multiply as they're shared. This is a gift economy. But isn't that how God's grace works? Salvation itself is a gift we didn't earn. Everything we have—our lives, our relationships, our talents—is a gift from God. We are called to share the gifts we have received freely and joyfully with others, just as God has so generously shared with us. This is how God's kingdom takes root and flourishes in our lives and in the world.

Let me tell you about someone in our church who lived this gift economy: our dear friend Warren Cole. Every summer, Warren poured his heart into his garden, working tirelessly in the sun to grow tomatoes, peppers, and other vegetables. Then, on Sundays, he would bring his harvest to church and share it with anyone who needed it. How many of you ever received some of Warren's vegetables? (Pause.) His generosity was like filling our cups with the “wine of joy.” And what did we do with the love and joy Warren shared? We passed it on—serving one another and reaching out to our neighbors. That's how God's kingdom grows in us.

## **Filling the Jars with Faith and Commitment**

Of course, trusting in God's abundance isn't easy. When we're faced with visible scarcity, sharing can feel risky. That's where faith comes in. Let me ask you a question: When Jesus told the servants to fill the jars with water and then draw some out to give to the master of the banquet, when do you think the water turned into wine? The most honest answer is probably, “We don't know.”

But during a Monday Bible study, a pastor shared a beautiful thought: He believed the water likely turned into wine when the servants drew it out and brought it to the master of the banquet. It was in their act of obedience and dedication—in the sweat they poured into filling those heavy jars with water and their faithfulness in following Jesus' instructions—that the miracle happened. When I heard that, I found myself nodding in agreement.

We serve God of abundance. When we walk with God, the wine of joy never runs dry. So, let us fill our jars with the water of obedience and faith. Let us share the small gifts we've received, trusting that God can use them to do something extraordinary. Through our acts of faith and service, God's abundance will fill the world, and God's kingdom will come to life among us.

As we enter 2025, I pray that your homes will be filled with the wine of joy and that this joy will overflow into the lives of those around you. May this year be one of overflowing blessings and abundant grace. Amen.