

Can You Turn Water into Wine?

January 19, 2025

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Can you turn water into wine?

The answer, of course, is yes. You can. You can turn water into wine. There's a trick to it.

The secret is to add grapes.

I am not the first to make that joke. Augustine of Hippo wrote in the fifth century, "The miracle indeed of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby He made the water into wine, is not marvellous to those who know that it was God's doing. For He who made wine on that day at the marriage feast, in those six water-pots, which He commanded to be filled with water, the self-same does this every year in vines. For even as that which the servants put into the water-pots was turned into wine by the doing of the Lord, so in like manner also is what the clouds pour forth changed into wine by the doing of the same Lord. But we do not wonder at the latter, because it happens every year: it has lost its marvellousness by its constant recurrence."

The world, Augustine observed, is full of God's miracles, so full that we've ceased to recognize them as God's handiwork.

It seems, however, that somebody goofed among the wedding planners in Cana. They ran out of wine. The hosts may not have been entirely at fault. As Lindsey S. Jodrey writes at Working Preacher, "We may read the story and wonder why the family of the bride and groom failed to provide enough wine. However, it was ancient custom for guests to bring wedding gifts in the form of food and drink to share the burden of providing for such a large group. Thus, the family's lack of wine may indicate a lack of community support in addition to their own lack of resources. Jesus' actions are that of a friend and faithful community member; the provision of wine is a sign of shared hospitality."

When Mary came to her son to tell him there was no wine, his reply, "What concern is that to me and to you?" was a little discomfiting. As a guest, he had some obligation to aid his host. Perhaps he had already contributed something to the feast. But perhaps – and John's narrative of a short time period between Jesus' baptism in the Jordan valley and his attendance at this wedding some miles away suggests this could have happened – perhaps Jesus and his new followers hadn't brought anything, or hadn't brought what his mother considered enough. Even if he had, it's clear that she thought he could and should do more.

The other half of Jesus' response, though, was more complicated. In John's Gospel, Jesus' "hour" ("My hour has not yet come") was the time of his crucifixion. If it seems like a stretch to say that Jesus saw this moment as one that set him on the path to that terrible Friday, I'll just say that the author didn't see it that way. Jesus' mother appears only twice in John's Gospel: here, and at the foot of the cross; when the hour had not yet come, and when the hour had come.

There was a simple way to deal with the situation. Jesus might have turned to Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, and said, "Come on, guys. Let's pool our money and go to the wine shop. Between us we might get enough to last out the evening." If he was concerned that five of them couldn't carry enough, Mary was enlisting the servers to help. Jesus didn't have to do what he actually did.

John called it the first of his signs. He meant something specific by that. It wasn't enough that Jesus did something remarkable, or powerful, or miraculous. That act revealed something about Jesus. It said something about his purpose. It said something about his nature.

John wrote that turning water into wine in Cana, the first of his signs, Jesus "revealed his glory."

But hardly anyone recognized it at the time.

The chief server didn't know. Nobody told him where the good wine had come from. The hosts didn't know. Nobody told them, either. The other guests didn't know. The servants knew, but if they told anyone else, John left it out. Jesus' mother knew. Jesus' closest friends knew, because they were paying attention.

As far as I can see, Jesus revealed his glory to less than a dozen people.

That tells us a lot about Jesus' glory, doesn't it? It's not a glory for show, to display or to impress. It's not a glory that cries, "Look at me!" It's not a glory about ego. It's not a glory that demands worship. It's a glory that can go unnoticed. It is, to go back to Augustine for a moment, a glory that can lose its marvellousness by its constant recurrence.

It was also a glory of profound compassion.

It's not clear just how much the hosts would have suffered if they had, in fact, run out of wine at the feast. Some scholars suggest it would have been shameful, which is no small thing in a culture based on honor and shame. Others don't think they would have experienced any long-term consequences. At the least, it would have been embarrassing. I'm pretty sure that years later, they'd have blushed when the story came up – again – "Remember when the wine ran out at the wedding? Good times!"

Mary thought that was worth avoiding. In the end, Jesus thought so, too.

I'm afraid that doesn't mean that Jesus will always act to preserve us from simple embarrassment. I can tell you that Jesus might have done that at various times in my life, but certainly not every time. I've been embarrassed more times than I care to count or remember. It does mean that Jesus cares more about the seemingly trivial parts of our lives than we might imagine. It's not all about life and death, suffering and wholeness, damnation and salvation. It's also about helping us through the other challenges of life.

Jesus' compassion extends not just to our health, but to our joy. As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "Turning water into wine is revealing of abundant grace in this season of Epiphany. And what does abundant grace taste like? Like the best wine when you are expecting the cheap stuff." Jesus' compassion delights.

Abundant grace is also easy to miss. How many people were at the wedding feast that day? I don't know. How many received this grace without knowing it? Nearly all. Nearly all.

So can you turn water into wine?

It turns out you can. You and I just have to work harder to make it happen. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Maybe we can be like Mary. Maybe we can notice, name, persist, and trust. No matter how profound the scarcity, no matter how impossible the situation, we can elbow our way in, pull Jesus aside, ask earnestly for help, and ready ourselves for action. We can tell God hard truths, even when we're supposed to be celebrating. We can keep human need squarely before our eyes, even and especially when denial, apathy, or distraction are easier options. And finally, we can invite others to obey the miraculous wine-maker we have come to know and trust."

We can turn water into wine.

We can bring more joy into the lives of our families, friends, and neighbors. We can act such that the needs we see get addressed, whether they're urgent and important or seemingly trivial. We can gather the supports to get things done. We can name and proclaim the acts of grace, the deeds of mercy, the times of transformation, and we can declare, "This is glory, people. Ignore the prattle of the powerful and their pathetic posturing. Glory is compassion. Glory is humility. Glory is love. This is glory."

Yes. We can say that. We can live that.

We can turn water into wine.

We can also turn wine into water, and for those who have addiction to alcohol, we might have to do that sometimes. There's a trick there, too. Boil it. The alcohol evaporates first. The point is: Don't let the metaphor get in the way.

Jesus displayed his glory with compassion, humility, and grace. Let us display our glory with compassion, humility, and grace.

Let us be like Mary. Let us be like Jesus.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson