

## **WINE, WATER AND WEDDINGS**

**Sermon preached by Reverend Edee C. Fenimore**

**January 14, 2007**

Texts: Psalm 36:5-10 and John 2:1-11

Henri Nouwen, a Belgian theologian has said, “Stories allow the hearer to wander around in them, experiencing from different angles the characters, setting and action. The hearer, in that wandering can ask the questions that are most important for that person.” I invite you now to experience from a slightly different perspective the story of the wedding at Cana. Come, ask the questions that are important to you as you wander for awhile, in the tale I call Wine, Water and A Wedding.

That was quite a wedding! I will never forget it and I have been to quite a few weddings. You see, I am the wife of a steward. A steward is a kind of manager; you might call him a master of ceremonies, a maitre d’, or head waiter. It was a rather important position, if I do say so myself. My husband takes care of all the arrangements for such affairs, weddings, parties, family gatherings. And often, he has me come along to help those that are doing the cooking, preparing the food. That’s how I came to be at that wedding on that particular day.

Oh, excuse my rudeness. My name is Sarah. I’m not the one you read about in your sacred stories. And, to tell the truth, I am not even mentioned in the story about this particular wedding. My husband is mentioned, not by name, but by his title, steward.

This wedding took place in Cana, that little town a half day’s walk north of Nazareth. To tell you the truth it was not the finest of families that were at that wedding, not the richest or the most influential. It was, you might say, a very ordinary celebration. Most of the guests were common people, fishermen, farmers, a few craftsmen and their wives. One of the people who was invited as a guest was Mary, the wife of Joseph, from Nazareth. She was a nice enough woman but there had always been the whiff of scandal about her. The story was told often enough. It seems that when her oldest child was born, she and Joseph were not even married. They were engaged but not married. Rumor has it that Joseph had some sort of dream that kept him from setting aside their engagement. The child, a boy, was born down in Bethlehem while they were there for the census. That was nearly 30 years ago but people still talk.

The boy was named Joshua, or Jesus, and there has always been talk about him. Seems, that just before that wedding, he had been gathering a group of followers about him and some of those followers thought that this man was Messiah, come to bring honor and glory to Israel. Now that man, Jesus, was at the wedding also, along with all those followers that he had gathered together. Now he didn’t look at all like Messiah to me. He certainly wasn’t the warrior-king that everyone expected Messiah to be. I saw him come in with that rag-a-tag group: fishermen, not elegant, powerful men at all. In fact, I heard that one of them was a collector of taxes. Now you know people who work for Rome in this way are considered unclean. Messiah would surely not have anyone in his entourage that was unclean, against the laws of purity.

Anyway, let me get back to describing that wedding. The wedding, ordinary as it was, seemed to be going along well, when suddenly there was no wine.... Well, I'm sure it was not all that sudden, but the discovery of the fact was sudden. It was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who seemed to notice it first and instead of going to my husband who normally would take care of such things, she went to her son. I saw her walk over to him and moved close so that I could hear what she said. She just looked up at him and spoke plainly. "They have no wine". I am not sure who else overheard her comment. Nobody mentioned anything but I'm sure if they had, their reaction would have been the same as mine. I thought, "This is the end of the celebration. You cannot have a wedding celebration without wine." And to be perfectly honest I had some other thoughts. I assumed it was because this family was ordinary, that is, they had no status, no knowledge of what is the expected behavior at a festive occasion such as a wedding. And I was worried that someone would blame the lapse on my husband. If it was improper planning on his part, his reputation as a good steward would have been tarnished and he would have had difficulty getting other parties to manage.

But before I had time to run off and alert my husband, Jesus answered his mother. He said, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour is not yet come." There are a few things I need to tell you about this statement. First of all, in that day, to address your mother as "woman" was considered a mark of respect as well as affection. It also is kind of saying, "I am no longer your little child. I am a grown person." But that business of "my hour is not yet come" was much more of a mystery to me. Even at the time when I heard it, overheard it, really, I wondered if this had something to do with the murmurings from those followers of his. They thought this man Jesus was Messiah and they wanted him to show the world just who he was and what he desired for the world. So though I did not fully understand the response of Jesus to his mother, I suspected that it had something to do with his gathering of followers and those rumors of Messiahship. It is interesting to me that, even at that time, as I was listening in, I knew it was not just a statement about the refreshments at the wedding.

But it is what happened next that surprised me the most. It was as if the mother of Jesus had not even heard his response, or if she had heard it she wasn't going to spend time wondering about what it meant. She simply turned to the servants and gesturing to her son said to them, "Do whatever he tells you." I asked myself if there was a quick lesson for me in this exchange. Maybe we cannot wait until all our questions are answered before we act. Maybe when there is something that we know must be done, we should just set about getting it done. "Do whatever he tells you", she said. And they did. Jesus stepped close to the six stone jars that were over on the side of the room. These were the jars that were used in our rites of purification and because they were stone there was no chance that they could become ritually unclean by contact with an unclean person or thing. They held 20-30 gallons of water and Jesus told the servants to fill them up. Let me tell you that I was a bit nervous, thinking to myself, he is busying those servants with nonsense activities when they should be passing out more food so that even if there is no wine, people will have plenty to eat. But the servants did as they were told and filled each of those large stone jars right up to the brim with water. Meanwhile of course, I am muttering to myself about wasting time with water and jars when we have a crisis that soon will bring the celebration to a grinding halt.

Just as I was about to interrupt the foolishness, Jesus said something to the servants that really upset me. Jesus told them to draw out some of the water and take it to the chief steward. I was worried about how upset my husband would become. I wanted to tell him about this whole foolish diversion

of the servants to filling those water jugs. The servants quickly dipped into those jugs of water and handed the ladle to my husband. As I moved across the room to him, I could see the shocked look on his face. I was sure he was distressed because he knew the celebration would be finished and that his position as chief steward at functions such this was in great jeopardy.

Before I reached his side, I heard him call to the bridegroom. The bridegroom, as you may know, is responsible for providing wine for the wedding celebration. My husband said to the bridegroom, "Most people serve the best wine first and then when the guests have drunk a great deal, they are offered the poorer wine. But you have saved the finest wine for the end of the celebration." My husband had tasted not water, but fine wine. That is really the end of the story.

When the celebration was over, I was left with more questions. Was the man Jesus Messiah? Would he return Israel to a time of glory? Had I witnessed a miracle? I had no definite answers but there is something that I learned that will stay with me forever. Signs of God's grace, evidence of the love of God can occur in the most common, ordinary places, in ways we could never imagine. We need to pay attention or we might miss the miracles that are part of our everyday lives. And when we see the signs, when we witness God's love, we are called to find ways to live out our thanks. May it be so for all of this and every day.

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