

The Life of the Party
John 2:1-10
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Strange things happen at weddings; Jesus turning water into wine at the Wedding Party at Cana is only one of them.

Years ago I did a wedding at Meadlawn Christian Church in Indianapolis. Because the sanctuary didn't have air conditioning and the rehearsal was late on a hot Friday afternoon, I invited the wedding party: the bridesmaids and groomsmen, to sit down as I was about to walk the bride and groom through the ceremony. Guess what? When I came to the exact point in the ceremony where I'd let them sit down at the rehearsal, **they did just that at the wedding! They all took off and sat down in the front row for the rest of the ceremony!** I hadn't made it clear they were supposed to remain standing! Alas! Ever since I've insisted wedding parties remain standing throughout the entire rehearsal.

But that episode was nothing compared to Jesus' miracle at the Wedding Feast at Cana turning water into wine. Why would he do this?

Some folks speculate Jesus was the host of the party! It was bad form on the part of the host if he let the party run out of wine. Besides, it was easy to run out of wine anyway since wedding parties in those days could last a week at a time! Jesus was just ensuring the wine supply was restored. Without wine the party would have been dead.

Whatever the reason: Once Jesus turned the water into wine everybody must have spotted him as “the life of the party!” After all, it isn’t every day you see someone turn water into wine. Imagine all the guests looking at the 180 gallons of wine and shouting in amazement: “H2-Whoa!”

Yet, the very last thing anybody ever says about Jesus or God is that they’re “the life of the party!” “Killjoys,” maybe! “Wet Mops,” maybe! But NOT “the life of the party!”

And this goes for the church! Remember the movie, “Footloose,” starring Kevin Bacon years ago? It was all about a staid, uptight minister played by John Lithgow, who wanted nothing to do with dancing in the church. The movie is so full of stereotypes about how rigid and dogmatic the church can be it makes me want to puke. But there is some truth in it all the same: churches often are stuffy and inflexible. We’re not here, in this church. If you don’t believe me, come to choir practice on Wednesday nights, where it’s party-time all the time!

Still, it’s always a temptation to become nay Sayers and wet mops. In the minds of many, we Christians are far better at turning wine back into water than water into wine. And, to a degree, they’re right.

“A woman in Galveston, Texas, was cleaning out a birdcage with a vacuum cleaner when the phone rang. In reaching for the phone with one hand the other hand holding the vacuum hose slipped a bit and—whoosh—

her pet parakeet got sucked into the bag. She opened the bag as fast as she could and managed to rescue the shocked bird. After cleaning all the dust, hair, and lint off the bird and getting it back into its cage, she noticed a profound change in its behavior. She thought it would get over it, but it never did. Weeks later she told a neighbor, ‘He doesn’t sing any more, he just sits and stares.’”

As the original teller of the story adds, “That can be said of a lot of church people. ‘They don’t sing any more, they just sit there and stare.’ The song of joy has gone out of them. They’ve been ‘vacuumed’ into the world’s bag or perhaps they’ve just gradually let pious ritual replace spontaneous joy. They’ve turned wine into water.”¹

Why would Christians do this? Why do churches become all obsessed about whether people toe-the-line rather than find any joy in a faith founded on the most amazing event in human history: the resurrection?

It starts with bad theology, with a God people make petty and small. Yes, God makes moral demands upon us. It’s why people quickly point to the 10 commandments and Jesus’ two Great Commandments about loving God and neighbor. But is this all God is: A Divine Prosecuting Attorney? A Cosmic Drill Sergeant? An Eager Executioner lurking in the bushes, waiting for us to mess up? Is God death to joy? The Death of the party?

Some of the great saints didn't think so. "St. Teresa of Avila disliked 'gloomy people,' and prayed to be delivered from 'frowning saints.'"² One writer notes, "C.S. Lewis may have become the chief Christian tutor to the 20th century because he refuses the perennial temptation to turn the wine back into water."³ This is a man who married a woman named Joy and wrote a book *Surprised By Joy!* celebrating the serendipity of his marriage to her late in his life. Imagine the statement it would make to those who don't know this church well, if they found out and learned how much joy is here!

It's like the story told by Tony Campolo of a special night in his life. One night Campolo was working until 3:00 a.m. in Hawaii, when he found a greasy spoon to get something to eat. He says, "As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee, 8 or 9 provocative and boisterous prostitutes walked in. It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place, and was about to leave, when one of them said, 'Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm turning 39.'

"Her friend responded snidely, 'So what do you want from me? A party? Ya want me to get a birthday cake and sing Happy Birthday'?

"Why do you have to be so mean?" she replied. 'I was just telling you, that's all. I mean why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party my whole life. Why should I have one now?'

With this, Campolo got moving. He asked the guy behind the counter, named Harry, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah." "The one next to me, does she come in here every night?" "Yeah! That's Agnes. Why do you want to know?" "Because I heard her say tomorrow's her birthday. What do you say we do something about that...throw her a birthday party tomorrow night?" Overhearing the conversation and catching hold of the idea, the fellow's wife from the back came out and said, "That's wonderful. You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody ever does anything for her." The three resolved to get together at 2:30 the next morning. Tony would bring the decorations and Harry would make the cake.

"At 2:30 the next morning, Campolo decorated the place with things he'd brought. 'I had that diner looking good,' he said." By 3:15, every prostitute in Honolulu showed up. At 3:30 on the dot, the door swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (I was sort of the M.C. of the affair), and when they came we all screamed 'Happy Birthday!'

"Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools, we all sang 'Happy Birthday.' As we came to the end, her eyes moistened. After she blew out the candles, we told her to cut the cake.

“But Agnes asked if it would be all right for her to take the cake home with her. She assured everyone she would be right back. As she took it with her, she carried it like it was the Holy Grail. Silence fell upon the place as she left, and so I asked everyone to pray. There I was a sociologist leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner at 3:30 in the morning. I prayed that Agnes’ life would change and that God would be good to her.

“When I finished Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice said, ‘Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?’ In one of those moments when just the right words came out I answered, ‘I belong to a church that throws parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.’

“Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, ‘No you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I’d join it.’

“Wouldn’t we all? Wouldn’t we all like to join a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning?”

“That’s the kind of church Jesus came to create,”⁴ where the name of the game isn’t cataloging people’s sins but transformation; not bookkeeping but resurrection. It’s the kind of Christians, the kind of churches, the kind of gospel that believes Jesus is the life of the party and can still turn water into wine.

¹*Pulpit Resource*, Jan-Feb 1991, p. 31

²Exposition, *Gospel of John, Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, p. 491.

³Ralph C. Wood, in a review of Lewis biographies in "Book and Religion" (Spring 1991), *Christianity Today*, as found in *PreachingToday.com*, References John 2:1-11

⁴Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, Word 1990, found in *PreachingToday.com*, Keyword: Transformation.