

**Welcome to the Party, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. E2070114**  
**Isaiah 62:1-5 and John 2:1-11**  
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In the first church I served, there were some wonderful deacons, but they were stingy. They wouldn't say they were stingy, they were just conserving precious funds. One thing became clearer and clearer as the weeks went on. It was the communion grape juice! I also noticed the communion cups were filled less and less full. But, when I questioned the deacons about what was going on, they said they were trying to save money, and by putting less grape juice into the cups, it lessened the possibility of people with shaky hands spilling grape juice on their clothes.

I thought, this grape juice is Jesus' blood, spilled—liberally; poured out—liberally for all of us for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus generously poured out his life for us, and you're being stingy with the grape juice? It should be overflowing from the brim if it is representative of Jesus' sacrifice! I responded with two statements. The first was made in the context of my daughters' youth at the time.

Most who saw me could tell what Emily or Maggie had eaten for lunch by looking at the shoulder of my coat! I had a habit of picking them up, hugging them, and sometimes burping them. There would usually be dried peas or orange juice, or bead crumbs on my shoulder. You could see what they ate. I said, "If you spill grape juice on your clothes, it becomes not just a spot, but a badge. You can use it as an evangelizing tool saying, 'That's communion wine; that's Jesus' blood, demonstrating the fact that Jesus died for me!' At my church, we have communion every Sunday, and all people are welcome." My statement did not quite hit home. I heard about the cost of dry-cleaning an expensive dress or suit!

The second statement I made was, "Jesus changed water to wine: to rich, full, tasty wine. Here, we don't even use wine; we use grape juice. Jesus changed water into wine and the Church has been changing the wine back into water ever since!"

Well, there were no miracles performed there. The deacons didn't change the watered-down grape juice into wine, but they did stop diluting the grape juice, and they filled the cups up to three-quarters full instead of only half full!

According to John, when Jesus changed the water into wine at the wedding party in Cana, it was Jesus' first "sign" or miracle. We may have problems with this miracle. We don't often think of drinking alcoholic beverages as Christian or morally correct. We have seen its terrible destructive effects in families and on our streets and highways. Its dangerous addictive qualities help to make it attractive, especially to young people. Yet, here was Jesus' changing water into wine!

We don't need wine or alcohol at parties in order to escape reality or drown our sorrows, or take away our inhibitions. We can drink the spirit of life that is Jesus. When we do, we can stare pain, and setback, and loneliness right in the face!

Wine was an important drink in Jesus' day. It was a common drink, readily available. The alcohol kept it pure in days before purification plans and refrigeration.

This passage is problematic in another way: We don't know how Jesus did it. All we can say is, it was a miracle. Strange things can happen when God is present.

There are implications to this miracle. The stone water jars were not just any water jars. They were not cisterns, used for collecting rain water. They were for Jewish rites of purification, rites prescribed by law. These were rites like washing hands before meals and purifying a woman after giving birth. These were things faithful people had to do in order to be accepted by God.

Jesus transformed this purification water, a symbol under the limiting law, to free and graceful purification in his blood, represented by the wine. The implication was, according to John, we are acceptable to God through Jesus' death, not through our acts of trying to clean sin away.

God's ways are mysterious. We don't know how the water changed to wine, or how Jesus arose from the dead, or how the earth orbits the sun, or why every snowflake is different, but Jesus did things we consider miraculous. Enough people saw them and attested to their reality.

The changing of water to wine was an "Epiphany" or showing to show God's transforming power

through Jesus. It was obvious to the wine steward and to the servants and to Jesus' disciples that this man was someone special. He had the power of God with him.

They, the ones around Jesus, were the fortunate ones. They saw the things Jesus did. We are not so fortunate. All we have is what is written in the Bible. John's gospel contains seventeen allusions to miracle-like signs. They included healing a sick child, feeding five thousand from five loaves and two fish, raising Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus' own resurrection. The miraculous signs in John separated the believers from the non-believers. Look at the last verse in the scripture reading: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

But, miracles aren't everything. Many saw the miracles and still didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. What counts for us is what Jesus said to a doubting Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."<sup>1</sup> John concludes his narration: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.<sup>2</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.<sup>3</sup> John has written his gospel with all of its extraordinary tales, so that you too can believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

I don't know where you need to see God's transforming power. We all know there's enough pain around the world today. From a man undergoing surgery, to victims of hurricanes, to victims of war in Iraq, I'd like to see some transforming from pain to joy. But God can transform.

Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, was a freed prisoner, who paid his debt to society, and became disillusioned when that society wouldn't let him be a productive part of it again. He robbed a bishop, but the bishop compassionately pardoned Valjean and in the process, transformed his life. Now, Jean Valjean had a higher purpose in his life. The bishop's grace connected Valjean with God. Valjean willingly sacrificed his life so the wretched could live with hope.

This was in contrast to Javert, who, bound to uphold the law, searched relentlessly to put Valjean back into prison for breaking his parole. In the end, we see Valjean freed by grace, living in glory, and Javert, bound to legality, committing suicide in disgrace. He lived legally, but was disillusioned when he realized the importance of grace and compassion.

But this scripture from John is about a wedding party – God reigns! Let's celebrate! We belong! We have been invited to the party! "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate," for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."<sup>4</sup>

All people are welcome to the party, old, young, rich poor, gay, straight–no matter what color, no matter what language. Jesus stands with arms outstretched, waiting to embrace you, waiting to transform you. The welcome is manifested in the communion table. Wine or grape juice signifies the blood of Jesus freely spilled, poured out, and overflowing in grace, salvation, and cleansing.

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<sup>1</sup>John 20:29)

<sup>2</sup>John 20:30

<sup>3</sup>John 20:31

<sup>4</sup>Isaiah 62:4-5