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Epiphanies: He's the Great Transformer

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TEXT: John 2:1-11 (NRSV)

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Things don't always go as planned at weddings. In fact, surprises typically do happen. I've seen it firsthand over my years of officiating at many, many weddings. I remember the wedding with the fainting bridegroom, for instance. Two minutes into the ceremony, he was sweating profusely, turning a funny color. He was about to go down in a faint when his best man grabbed him. We had to have chairs brought up to the front for him and his bride to sit in for the rest of the ceremony. I remember a vomiting groomsman running out on the side aisle of the church sanctuary at another wedding. Or there were a number of times ceremonies were held up because important guests got

lost along the way – couldn't find the church building. Everybody was in a frenzy. I remember ring bearers and flower girls running around the front and the altar, getting all the attention instead of the bride and the groom during the ceremony. So, when it comes to weddings, this old saying applies: the best laid plans.

Well, such is the case in today's story. It's about a wedding, a wedding that had an unpleasant surprise. Now, weddings at the time of Jesus were major social events. They'd last for almost a week. Can you imagine what that would cost us today? Well, this one turned into a social disaster when they ran out of wine. For a Jewish feast in that day, wine was an essential. There was an old rabbinic saying, in fact, that went like this: "Where there is no wine, there is no joy." This kind of thing was definitely a major faux pas in a culture where hospitality was so important. It would be a major embarrassment for the host and his family and a major disappointment for the community who looked forward to having this kind of celebration, and it would not be forgotten among the villagers over the years. What are we going to do to save this wedding from being a social disaster? That's when Mary turned to Jesus and laid out the problem for him. "They have no wine." Jesus seemed a bit reluctant, a little standoffish with her at first, but then he quietly transformed the situation, changing one hundred and eighty gallons of water into first class wine. Disaster was not only averted, but an even more joy-filled celebration occurred. The wedding feast continued on.

John makes this editorial statement at this point in the story. He writes, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee; and revealed his glory." Notice that John refers to this miracle as a sign. Signs inform us, point to somewhere; they guide us. At that wedding, Jesus pointed us to his glory. Glory signifies the presence of God. That's what was revealed in Jesus. God's majesty and power and authority was being put on display by Jesus right before the very eyes of those new disciples whom he had promised three days earlier, "Come with me and you will see even greater things." And now, only three days later, in Cana, they began to witness God's glory revealed in Jesus as he transformed a dismal situation into one of richness in abundance and joy.

By the way, notice that John calls this the first sign. There were even greater signs to come. Ultimately, his hour, which he talked about in this story and throughout John's gospel, would come when he would be nailed to the cross: the greatest sign. That would be his greatest moment of changing things and bring in God's generosity and love and glory to us. There he would pay for the sins of the whole world, and his sacrifice would

mean forgiveness for our sins – more than enough to cover everyone's debt. And that means joy for those who come to Christ. Did you notice that this first sign happened on the third day? On another third day, Jesus would rise from the dead after his death on the cross, victorious over the power of sin and death, which held humanity captive. Joy to the world!

What Jesus did with wine and the wedding party, he can do with lives. That's the message. Biblical scholars point out that everything in John's gospel means something and everything points beyond itself. There are hidden meanings and symbolism that speak divine truths to us. And of course, the first thing that's pointed out to us is that Jesus is the son of God, revealing the glory of God. John is also making a statement here, though, that wherever Jesus went and whatever he did, people received in abundance. In fact, he said, "I came that you may have life and have it abundantly." Here we see abundance, don't we? Great quantities of wine. One hundred and eighty gallons of wine. And Jesus still does this as the risen Lord. Furthermore, when Jesus enters into a person's life, not only is there quantity, but there comes a new quality, like that of water turning into an excellent wine. Before him, life was dull and stale and flat; but with him and in him, life becomes vivid, exciting, thrilling, colorful, and exhilarating. Like excellent wine.

Now, that's the big idea of this story for us. It's the message of the transforming power of Jesus. He changes things and he changes lives. The same Jesus who gladdened and saved a wedding party by his presence can gladden and save your party – your very life. He came so that you may have life with God and have it abundantly. That's why he stepped down from Heaven to Earth. He came to enter into our personal situations, our relationships, our homes, our marriages. He came to be at the center of our lives. And the image scripture gives us of this is that he stands at the door of our life and knocks, waiting to be invited in. And when he moves into a life, things can change in amazing and positive ways. Being true man, born of the virgin Mary, he knows our joys and struggles, our strengths and weaknesses, because he experienced the same things. And as true God, he can take the water of our ordinary, everyday life, filled with its problems and challenges, and change it into something extraordinary as he fills us with his life-changing spirit, which gives us the joy of the Lord – the joy of knowing we are deeply loved by our heavenly father.

This newness and freshness, God's grace, shown in this story is still available to you and to me today – whatever your condition, whatever your background, whatever your need. Maybe you are someone who's feeling a bit lifeless, dull. You feel like you've lost the plot of living and you're stuck. And your party, so to speak, is waning. Well, that doesn't have to be the end of your story. Remember, Mary did a wise thing that day, wouldn't you say? She turned to Jesus and told him the problem. "They have no wine." She trusted him, laid it at his feet, yielded it to him. Notice that she also told those servants: "Do whatever he tells you." Good idea, Mary! Obey Jesus, because he knows exactly what's needed. And so those servants did. They filled the empty jars. They, in faith, took the water, a cup of water to the master of ceremonies, the wine steward. And an amazing thing happened, didn't it?

Well, you can do that. In fact, I encourage you to turn to him in faith and let him take over every part of your life with his transforming power – to yield to him, to trust him. And be willing to do whatever he tells you, in his word, the Bible. I mean, I can't think of a better way to step into a new year than to let him give you this new, exhilarating life he offers: the transformed life. To be renewed by his presence in you, to allow the resurrecting, awakening power of Jesus to give you a rock-solid hope; to guide your future, to enliven you, to give you the life God has always wanted you to have. A life of joy with him at the center.

The gospel writer John, who was actually one of the disciples of Jesus, testifies at the end of this episode, "And his disciples believed in him." That means they followed him. They walked with him, stuck with them, trusted him, they did life with Jesus. They had a personal relationship with him. Well, so can you. In fact, that's the whole point of sharing this wedding story. That's why John saved it, wrote it in his gospel. At the end of his gospel, he writes in chapter 20, "Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." That risen, Jesus Christ is still here, available through his spirit, to renew you. You may not have had any experience with him before, but he stands ready to enter into your life. He wants to transform you. And you may be a Christian, but you feel your faith life has become routine and dry, and you're longing for a fresh touch from God, a sense of his nearness and his love for you. Well, that can happen for you starting right now. You can experience the power of a personal relationship with him, who will give you the deep joy of knowing that you are never

alone and that you are loved deeply and eternally through Jesus Christ. It all begins when you yield yourself to him. There's a willingness to trust him and to do what he says because you believe in your heart of hearts that he knows what makes your God-given life work best. After all, he was there in the beginning when creation began, so of course, the designer knows what makes it work best. And when he moves in, and Christ is formed in us (as Paul talks about it), he brings his joy along with him. It's an amazing joy.

C.S. Lewis, who moved from atheism to agnosticism to Christianity, one of the great minds of Christianity, in fact, said he was surprised by joy after his conversion. That was the title of his autobiography, because that was the experience Lewis had as he followed Jesus the rest of his life through all its ups and downs. And listen to these words of evangelist E. Stanley Jones as he writes of his experience with Jesus, I love these words. "When I met Christ," Jones says, "I felt that I had swallowed sunshine." And my friend, that joy that we can experience now is only a foretaste of what's to come in the end. Joy beyond compare awaits those who belong to Jesus Christ. The whole creation will be transformed in the end, a new Heaven and a new Earth is coming and God will wipe away our tears. And there will be no more mourning and crying and pain and no more death. Just joy. The Lord's Supper that we take in the church is our reminder of this joy to come. It's a foretaste of the marriage feast, the marriage banquet to come with Jesus as the bridegroom and we as his bride, in whom he delights.

So maybe you'd like to have this transforming power of Jesus working in you. I adapted a wedding prayer from the Lutheran Book of Worship for us to use as I close this message for today, and I invite you to join me in praying it – you just repeat each line of this prayer after me.

Eternal God, our creator and redeemer. As you gladdened the wedding at Cana by the presence of your son, so by his presence, now, bring your joy to my life. Enter in. Look in favor upon me and grant that I, rejoicing in all your gifts, may at length, celebrate with Christ the marriage feast, which has no end. In the name of Jesus, I ask this.

Amen.