

Holding a large duck in his arms, a young man knocked on the door of a monastery. The young man’s uncle, who happened to be a monk, answered the knock: “Here, Uncle, this is a gift. Eat it in good health.” All the monks were grateful for the unexpected gift, and that night they shared a generous feast.

A couple days later, another knock came on the monastery door. “I am a friend of the nephew who brought you the duck. I am a bit down on my luck, and I wonder if I might impose on you for a bite to eat?” The friend was welcomed through the door, and he joined the monks at supper for a bowl of steamy duck soup.

A few days later, there was another knock upon the monastery door. “I am the friend of the friend of the nephew who brought the duck. Could I too impose on you for a bit of hospitality?” He was welcomed and more duck soup was served.

A few days more went by. Another knock. “I am a friend of the friend of the friend of the nephew who brought you the duck.” At dinner this guest was presented a steaming bowl of *watery liquid*. “What is this?” he asked. The monk replied: “This is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck that my nephew brought.”

...
One preacher draws a lesson between this story and Christianity, suggesting that as it has been passed down from generation to generation, our faith risks being watered down. In the words of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, “Christ turned water into wine, but the church has done something even more difficult: it has turned wine into water.” Kierkegaard was clearly alluding to our morning gospel reading.

...
Of the four Biblical gospels, John is the only one which tells this story: of how Jesus’ first miraculous sign was to change water into wine at a wedding celebration in Cana.

To be candid, I’ve always disliked this story... I find it embarrassing; **not** because it reports a miracle, but because **of the miracle** it reports! Changing water into wine just isn’t something I think Jesus should’ve gotten involved in!

Yes, it would’ve been a serious social disgrace for the wedding host to run out of wine, so Jesus does save the bridegroom from public humiliation. But the family is clearly not impoverished! In fact, they seem quite wealthy. They have both servants and expensive stone jars! And then, an extravagant quantity of wine is produced – between 120 to 180 gallons! (That would be the equivalent of about 1000 bottles of wine today.) So, it’s clearly more than the party could ever use and, as the steward implies in v. 10, the wedding celebration is nearing its end! Why such an abundant quantity?

Compared with the needs of the desperately sick or disabled who Jesus healed, or compared with the hunger of the crowds which Jesus fed, why more wine for a party? It seems frivolous.

...
And so the preliminary point I need to make is this: we need to acknowledge how often we expect God to fit and act according to *our* frame of reference! As long as God or Jesus does what we desire or expect – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, calling out the hypocrites – that’s okay. But if we come to a story, that doesn’t fit our theological preferences, you may sometimes do what I have done with this scripture, pushed it aside... only to **miss out** on what it offers. So let’s dive in and explore this text...

...
For many people, John is the most enigmatic of the four gospels. One scholar says, “John likes to puzzle, to tease... to provoke his readers into thinking about what he writes. He doesn’t spell out everything.” For those who’ve read – or tried to read the gospel of John – doesn’t that ring true? Compared with the other gospels, John’s gospel can seem inscrutable.

One of the many puzzles that teased me is the significance of the six stone jars mentioned in v. 6. Up to this point John’s gospel hasn’t been overly concerned to provide details. But suddenly, John provides copious details about water jars – how many there are (6), what they’re made of (stone), what they’re used for (rites of purification), and how big they are (20-30 gallons each).

As you might imagine, these details are important and so let’s explore three reasons John may have gone into such great detail about these jars – three things which may help us avoid a “watered down” Christianity.

...

The first thing is about the number of jars and their volume. Various prophets believed that an abundance of good wine would be a sign of the **joyous arrival of God’s new age**. The prophet Amos says, “The time is surely coming... when the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.” (9:13) Isaiah says, “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...” (25:6a)

So, the extravagant amount of wine Jesus created has nothing to do with providing more wine for intoxicated wedding guests and it really isn’t about saving the bridegroom embarrassment! The overflowing wine is sign that, in Jesus, God’s new age **has arrived**. And this act is so abundant, so extravagant, that it blesses those who are not part of Jesus’ circle of family and followers. Those at the feast, who clearly have no awareness of what’s happened, are still blessed by Jesus’ extravagance! So a Christianity that’s not watered down celebrates that God’s extravagance flows – it gushes – upon us but also upon those who are not Jesus’ followers. Our faith should be a blessing that blesses – rather than curses – others.

...

The second thing about these jars is that the new wine is produced within the “old vessels” of Jewish purification rites. Biblical theologians are quick to point out the symbolism: that even **old containers** can be filled with new content. This miracle then, is not – as some have said -- a rejection nor a replacement of the old religion, but it is **the creation** of something new and vital **within** the old. (O’Day)

We religious types often wax nostalgic for “good old days” when everyone went to church on Sundays, when the school day started with prayer, when boys never wore hats inside! And some even wonder why anyone would sing contemporary, repetitive praise songs, instead of the theologically rich hymns of the 18th and

19th centuries. (We conveniently forget that repetitive chants are far more ancient – far more “traditional” – than anything written by Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley.)

As the wisest theologian in my family says (and I currently rank #5); my wife says: “We are to look to the past to **claim our heritage - but not** to set our boundaries.” We look to the past to claim our heritage - but not to set our boundaries. These 6 ritual containers signify the past; and the change *within* them is a metaphor for Jesus’ boundary breaking ministry as he brings new vitality *within* the ancient religion. A faith that’s not watered down trusts that what **God has in store for the future is way better** than clinging too firmly to “the good old days.”

...

Finally, I want to point out how these 6 stone jars get filled. Note that Jesus’ mother tells the servants: “Do whatever he tells you.” And when the servants do what Jesus directs, that’s when and how the miracle occurs. So when Jesus’ mother says, “Do whatever he tells you to do” it is to foreshadow what can happen when we do what Jesus asks us to do! The writer of the 4th gospel wants us to know that whenever we (as faithful servants) do as Jesus directs, God can transform our lives into an extraordinary blessing.

My friends, in and through Christ, we know that God desires to bless us abundantly and transform us (and the world) in ways that we cannot begin to imagine. So let us not settle for a faith that waters down this witness. Instead, let’s listen to what Jesus has directed us to do, and be filled with such overflowing abundance that we bless anyone and everyone we encounter. Amen.