

“Celebrate Life Everyday”
Isaiah 62: 1-5 and John 2: 1-11

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=isaiah+62:1-5

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+2:1-11

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“Always Choose Life”

Over 15 years ago when I was out of town one of the persons who preached on a Sunday chose the topic, “Why I like beer.” I understand that the sermon was quite good. The person told the congregation of God’s working in his life to help him understand the importance of honoring others. The topic and the first sentence of the sermon; however, created quite a furor. When you challenge people’s expectations, you often get a negative reaction.

I am not going to talk about beer in this sermon, but I am going to talk about wine. Ralph Milton wrote a story entitled “Winter Wine” several years ago. He writes articles for clergy from his home in the wine growing country of Canada. In one article he wrote: “Mid-January is a good time to forget about sermons and gifts and budgets and go for a long walk in the snow. Walk through the vineyard and notice the grapes. There’s not many, but here and there a few –forgotten by easy weather harvesters—frozen, dead on the vine. Pick those wrinkled, rock-hard, refugee grapes from the bare and leafless vines (put them) into your pockets and into your cap and carry them into the house. Make wine. Yes, wine from frozen grapes. Ice wine, they call it. Some people say it is the finest wine—sweet and mellow. In the stores it sells for three or four times the usual price. Much finer, smoother it is, than fair weather wines and much more precious. But, for those who glean the vineyards in the dead of winter, this precious wine is free.”

Who would think that some of the best wine would come from dead and frozen grapes harvested in mid-winter? Such a thought breaks our stereotypes, shatters our carefully constructed paradigms; transforms our expectations. We are surprised!

So does Jesus surprise us by choosing to introduce his ministry by becoming a wine master? If I were going to begin a new ministry I would want to begin it with a great big event. Say rent the hippodrome in Jerusalem and have huge crowds gather to cheer for me. I would want to heal Herod, impress Pilate, or be accepted by the ruling Priestly elite.

But, Jesus surprises us with his first great miracle. The very first time he shows forth the glory of God that is within him is in a small backwoods town where the host had not prepared enough wine for the quests. Jesus bails out the marriage couple by creating wine. They will not be embarrassed because Jesus came through for them. Excuse me! What is Jesus doing? The Jerusalem Times reporter was not even there. What a way to market your ministry.

Jesus shatters our nicely held, perfectly crafted, wonderfully controlled assumptions about him and his world. Jesus shakes us up. Jesus turns our world upside down. Jesus is full of surprises. He wants us to let go of our carefully constructed worlds and live in the true reality of God.

Our carefully constructed world

You might ask me what I mean when I say your carefully constructed world. Don’t you know that in large part we create our world?

- If you assume the world will be a negative place, it will be.
- If you expect people to reject you, they will.
- If you think your children are stupid and you continually tell them so, then they will grow up to be stupid. You create your world.

Let me give you a clergy example. If I assume that you want me to look, act, and live the part of a “holy man.” (I am thankful that you do not.) Then, I will create a facade that matches your expectations. Because I have to expend a lot of energy looking “holy” I will find ways to continually hide behind my mask. It takes too much energy to keep up the mask all the time. I will become defensive and aloof. The more life energy I put into keeping up the mask, the more vulnerable I am to the more human instinctual aspects of my life that I am seeking to deny. I will assume that I am the image that I project for you. I will also be consumed by guilt because of the other world that lives just below the surface. In a weak moment, I will fall into that morass of denied humanity. At that point I will work harder to keep up the mask. This false self plan is a continual descent into fantasy! If you think such a process is too far fetched, then I remind you of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker. Both of these men began their ministries with good intentions. They became trapped in the world of their own creating.

Our assumptions and expectations create the world in which we live. They are the foundations upon which we build our lives. Therefore, it is important that we examine our assumptions, challenge our expectations, ask God to transform our mental paradigms so that we can continue to grow in God’s real world and not create a false world of our own making.

Thankfully, Jesus loves to challenge our presuppositions! If you allow him, Jesus will surprise you. Jesus constantly takes us beyond our limitations into new ways of thinking and living. Such is the impact of Cana wine.

We live with sanctimonious, superficial religious assumptions.

In many ways we in America have fallen into the same religious clap trap that held the people of Jesus day.

- They assumed that God wanted legalistic religious observance. So do we!
- They had a love/hate relationship with the pious, holy men of the village. So do we!
- They had particular images of a religious person. So do we!

Allow me expand upon these statements. Our image of a good religious person in America grows out of our puritan heritage. We define such a person by what they do not do. We define them by how they look: the black suited somber New England male and the church lady from Saturday night live will do, thank you very much. We are happy to talk about our religious holy people’s failures, yet we get angry with them when they do falter. There are certain places where we do not want them to go. There are certain movies that we do not want them to be seen attending. We also think our good religious person does not feel pain, does not suffer, and will joyfully embrace death. Our assumptions are strong and create the world in which the church inhabits.

Ralph Neighbors, God’s leader in the cell church movement, had all of the people who attended his cell church conference spend time in the bars surrounding Virginia Beach so that they would learn how to talk with people who were not Christian. Because our American religious image is so strong most church people have no non-Christian friends. We create a world of isolation. That fits, by the way, the stereotypical image of the American religious type. We are in enclaves, trying to obey the rules, feeling guilty that we are not good enough, and comparing ourselves to the religious image that drives our lives. We think God is a judge waiting to condemn us. We think the church is an institution that wants to grab our money and take away our fun.

Brothers and sisters, the people of Israel in Jesus’ day thought much the same. Jesus broke up their carefully constructed images. Jesus blew up their religious assumptions. Jesus threw up over their self righteousness and piety. Jesus urged them to forget all the somber, sober, sanctified, self-satisfied, sincerely yours, sweetness, sugar, and syrupy religious expectations. God has something else in mind! Let’s have a party.

Perhaps the most deadly assumption that we in the Western church have perpetrated upon the world is our distorted image of Jesus. Please forgive me if I offend your sensibilities, but I think the 1930’s Salmon’s portrait of Jesus is atrocious. It captures the western image of Jesus the aloof, sweet, non-plus, white, controlled, pious gentleman. I cannot imagine that Jesus turning at least 120 gallons, perhaps 180 gallons, of water into premium wine for a party.

I like the more contemporary portrait of Jesus as he laughs a great big belly laugh while surrounded by children. Read the Gospels. People were attracted to Jesus. Jesus was the life of the party. Any time Jesus entered a village people flocked to be with him, hear him, and touch him. There was magnetism in Jesus' presence. There was joy surrounding him. There was a spirit of life that flowed from him, Jesus was and is the life of the party. There is a joyful power from God flowing through Jesus to everyone he meets!

The Gospel of John emphasizes symbols of the real and abundant life in Christ!

When we read John's gospel we are always aware of multiple layers of meaning. There is the first level of actual fact followed by deep and profound symbols. Looking first at the actual story, we find much to enjoy. The wedding is a great occasion for this small village. Beginning on Wednesday and lasting for a week, this event is a joyous celebration in the life of everyone. To have the wine run out before the end of the week is a horrible mistake. In the Middle East, hospitality is of utmost importance. This breach of etiquette will be remembered for as long as the couple lives in the village. Mary is probably related to the couple in some way. Therefore, she is quite interested in their well being. Jesus is asked to help. There are stone water jars beside the entrance. The roads are dusty and dirty. Guests are provided with water to refresh themselves by washing off the dirt on their hands, feet, and face. The literal aspects of this story are believable. They fit the lifestyle of the first century Middle East. Let's look deeper into the story to find out what is happening at that level.

I do not think it is a mistake that Jesus chose to reveal God's power for the first time at a wedding by providing the wine. There is such rich symbolism for life with God in this story. I want to urge you to let these symbols move deep into your sub conscious mind so that you can begin to let them live in your life. They will challenge your assumptions. They will change your expectations. If you allow, the Holy Spirit will move through these symbols and transform your life.

The Wedding

In Holy Scripture the wedding is a symbol for God's love of his people. In *Isaiah 54: 4-5 and 62: 4-5*, (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=isaiah+54:4-5;62:4-5) the wedding imagery is used to express a time of fulfillment of God's loving purpose with the people. Within a wedding is a feast, a great banquet, a marvelous joyful time of expression of laughter and love. God's hope for every marriage and every family is for God's power of joy to be within their midst! When your home is centered in God's powerful love, joy will abound!

God created people to laugh. The average child laughs over 400 times every day. Count them sometimes! Scientists tell us that for adults to remain healthy, we need to laugh at least 50 times a day. How far along are you on making your quota? Remember it takes 43 muscles to frown and only 17 to smile. God created you to laugh. God created you to live as if every day was a wedding feast.

Don't let your assumptions and expectations get in the way here. I can already hear the, "yes, but..." and the "if only you knew..." and the "I wish it could be so, but..." Let me remind you that in large part you create your world.

You can assume that each day is a joyful experience with God. You can expect to find God's love and laughter within your heart no matter what else the world throws at you. You decide whether you are open to God's powerful joy flowing into your life or not!

Let God turn the cold stone jars of your tasteless life water into joyous wine! God can make the sweetest wine from the frozen grapes of winter. Let God surprise you this week!

Six Stone Jars

Not being First Century Jews you could miss this symbol. Within the practice of Jewish numerology seven is the perfect and whole number. The number six is almost perfect. The Apostle John is using this number to symbolize the Jewish religious system of laws. The legalist system will almost get you to God's miraculous living, but not quite.

Notice that Jesus provides more wine than could ever be used! Depending on the size of the jars we could have 120 to 180 gallons of wine! The symbol is of God's rich, abundant, overflowing grace surprising the wedding master and us! God's grace is always surprising in its unconditional abundance.

Cana Wine

In Holy Scripture, wine is a symbol of the joy of God's fulfillment at Christ's coming in glory. The abundance of good wine symbolizes the joy of the feast of God. The Rabbis said, "without wine there is no joy." Drunkenness was a disgrace to God. But, joyful, exuberant laughter and fellowship was symbolized by wine. Read **Amos 9:11-14, Hosea 14:4-7, Jeremiah 31:12-14; Hosea 2:21-22; Joel 3:18; and Isaiah 20:17**

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=amos+9:11-14) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=hosea+14:4-7)
(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=jeremiah+31:12-14) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=hosea+2:21-22)
(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=joel+3:18) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=isaiah+20:17) and you will find a direct symbolic connection with wine and the joy of God's presence in the fellowship of God's people.

Let us choose to live a life celebrating the joyous presence of God every day! Jesus' first act was to affirm the power of God's joy that is available to you. When you allow yourself to be open to the flowing of the power of God, you will know great joy no matter what the world is throwing at you on that day. The Apostle Paul knew this spiritual truth and personally witnessed to God's joy when he wrote to the Christ followers in the Roman city of Philippi. The Apostle Paul wrote:

"Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in God! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. Christ could show up any minute!

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse....Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies." *Philippians 4:4-9*

Let us choose to live by God given assumptions, expectations, and patterns that keep us connected to God's power! When we are connected, God can abundantly bless us each and every day. Choose today to let Christ challenge your negativity! Choose today to let Christ teach you to enjoy God's amazing grace everyday. The Apostle Paul learned to rejoice in the lord in all things. Let us also learn to let Christ's spirit of Cana wine live grow and blossom within each of us.

By the way, you do have a way to tell you how well you are connected to God's amazing, life giving, and joyful power. Are you laughing at least 50 times each day?

"Always Choose Life"