

## Jesus and the Good Stuff

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“Jesus did this, the first of his signs. . . .” – John 2:11

On my refrigerator is a magnet that has a quote on it attributed to Ben Franklin. It says, “Beer is the proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”

Like many sayings attributed to famous people, it's impossible to know if Ben really did say that, but the sentiment fits his character. Ben, unlike my Baptist forebears, was not a teetotaler. One of the things we do know he said is found in a letter he wrote to his friend Andre Morellet in 1779: “Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, and which incorporates itself with the grapes to be turned into wine; a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy.”

Ben liked an alcoholic drink, and apparently so did Jesus, and that was a needling source of discomfort for the Baptists among whom I was raised. Like all Baptists, we were Bible-believing Baptists, looking to Scripture to guide our every move. And like many Baptists, one of the moves we never made was to pick up an alcoholic beverage. We were teetotalers, and we were convinced that Scripture mandated our teetotaling lifestyle. I don't believe I ever heard a sermon preached on John's report of Jesus' first miracle.

Teetotaling was a way to avoid the sin of drunkenness, and the Bible teaches that drunkenness is to be avoided. We did have that right. As early as the ninth chapter of Genesis, we read of Noah surviving the flood, only to humiliate himself by falling into a drunken stupor without wearing any clothes. His youngest son sees his father's embarrassing state and doesn't do anything to help him, which results in his being cursed by Noah when he awakes. None of it would have happened if Noah had been able to drink responsibly.

And a few chapters later is the entirely unedifying story of Lot and his daughters, who escape ravaging by the men of Sodom only to succumb to their own mistaken belief that they're the last people on earth, and, in order not to die childless, the daughters seduce their father by getting him drunk with wine. The father who had been prepared to allow his daughters to be gang-raped becomes the incestuous ancestor of two of Israel's historic enemies. It's a distastefully ironic story that biblical scholars call an etiology – a story of origins. The Israelites never thought much of Moabites and Ammonites, and so this is the story they told of where they came from. Again, drinking to excess played a leading role.

So it's understandable why we Baptists erected a huge fence around the consumption of alcohol, and why people historically have had a low opinion of folks who can't handle drink and yet won't leave the stuff alone. Not knowing when to quit reveals flawed judgment and a lack of self-control. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus complained to his disciples that one of the things his detractors said of him was that he habitually drank too much: “For John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Human One came eating and drinking and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard! A friend of tax collectors and sinners!'” (11:16-19). Jesus' point

was that no matter what you do, you can't please some people, but one of the things that displeases people most is others who drink to excess.

So the Bible takes a dim view of drunkenness, and with good reason. And yet, here at the beginning of John's gospel and Jesus' ministry, we have a story of people drinking at a wedding feast, the wine running out, and Jesus turning water into wine so that . . . what? So that the party can continue? So that the guests won't think the hosts are cheap? So that he can have a trial run at miracle working? So that his disciples will know who they're following?

It's hard to say, in part because the story is soaked with difficulties. In the first place, it's found only in the Gospel of John, and when a story is found in only one of the canonical gospels, it makes you wonder what that evangelist saw in that story that the other three evangelists didn't – why only John found the story of Jesus turning water into wine worth preserving, while Matthew, Mark, and Luke didn't include it in their accounts of Jesus' life and teachings.

Asking that sort of question moves us from the realm of reportage to the realm of theology, which is where we want to be when it comes to understanding Scripture. We modern folks fret about facts, thinking facts can help us sort out life's most entangled questions. And facts do matter, especially if you hold public office or wield a scalpel or lead troops into combat.

But our ancestors believed that theology – God's Word and our words about God – might do a better job of helping us with life's biggest questions. And John seems to be concerned far more with theology than with history when it comes to telling us about Jesus.

For instance, John opens this story with the chronological note, “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.” That's the first verse of the second chapter of John's gospel. The problem is, if you look at the first chapter of John's gospel, you'll read this: John 1:29 says “the next day,” and John 1:35 says “the next day,” and John 1:43 says “the next day,” and although I've never been good at math, even I can see that this means we're already at the fifth day by the time we get to the wedding at Cana. The numbers don't add up, which says to me that maybe John didn't intend for “the third day” to refer to the days preceding the wedding, but rather to an important third day after the wedding – namely, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which all the evangelists agree was on the third day after his death.

It's more than likely that John is telling us by his apparently incorrect temporal marker – “On the third day there was a wedding” – that the wedding he's telling us about might not be the kind of wedding that we think of first when we hear that word. John might not be recording Jesus' rescuing a wedding host from an embarrassing social faux pas. The wedding “on the third day” John might be referring to is a joining together of an entirely different sort, the uniting of the human and the divine that Jesus' life, teachings, and resurrection brought about. When Jesus was raised from death, God affirmed his way of life, and the old enmity between the physical and the spiritual was overcome – finally – and the joy that people experience at a typical wedding could now be part of every believer's life every single day.

That's theology, and that's the way John does theology. He's subtle, he's quick, and he's very good at it, and it doesn't take many words – “On the third day” – for John to make a theological statement for those who have the ears to hear it. It takes work and practice to develop that theological sense of hearing, which is why dipping your toe into Scripture every now and then isn't going to do you much good.

John's not writing history, he's doing theology, and the theology he's doing is affirming the good things of life – the good stuff, in other words – and John puts Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Word made

flesh, right in the middle of it. That's why he's at a wedding celebration and that's why he makes better wine when the regular wine runs out. Jesus produces the good stuff to affirm the basic goodness of stuff. This world – God's creation – is good, and Jesus' first miracle, according to John, is to affirm that goodness. At the beginning of his gospel, John goes all the way back to the beginning of the biblical gospel, where we're told six times that creation is good.

And enjoying a good glass of wine isn't the same as drunkenness, and enjoying good food isn't the same as gluttony, and enjoying the security of a good home bought with money isn't the same thing as loving money or greed. The goodness of creation, including the creation that we have a role in, such as the production of wine or the building of houses, is meant to be enjoyed by everyone.

And that's where we run into difficulties, because some of us want to enjoy a lot of the goodness of creation, while leaving many of us to enjoy very little of it. That imbalance is just plain wrong, and it's not natural. It's the product of the way we've put our lives together – built our systems and rules and laws and regulations and mores and even morals, and it's all still wrong.

That this person has more than that person is not to be marveled at or lamented or condemned, provided both are able to enjoy creation's goodness. But when this one enjoys creation's goodness at that one's expense – then there's a problem. And when that happens for so long that people forget what it was like for everyone to have enough, then we come to the dangerous place of believing that injustice is natural. It's not.

Perhaps you've noticed recently that fresh pineapples are on sale in many of our grocery stores. They're a delicious taste of sunshine for those of us locked inside the ice cube of a Midwestern winter. I love pineapple, and as I broke one down in my kitchen the other night, I reflected on that pineapple's ancestry.

About a hundred years ago, the folks whose name is on that pineapple, the Dole family, were instrumental in overthrowing the monarchy of the kingdom of Hawaii, paving the way for Hawaii to be annexed to the United States. The Doles were part of the agricultural oligarchy that pretty much ran things on the islands of Hawaii, and all of those wealthy landowners wanted to get rid of the tariffs that cut into their profits when they sold pineapples on the American mainland. And those tariffs would go away if Hawaii became part of the United States.

And so, with the help of American businessmen and American troops, Hawaii went from being a kingdom to a republic to a territory and, eventually, to a state.

And worse than the political turmoil supported by the Doles and other landowners were the conditions that gradually emerged for the island natives, as more and more land where native people grew their food for local consumption was put under pineapple cultivation for export. While a few families grew enormously wealthy, many families suffered malnutrition and poverty. It's a familiar story, repeated around the globe many times: wealthy private investors, with the support of local governments, force native populations to grow cash crops for export rather than the food they need to support themselves. It happens again and again because governments want cash, not sweet potatoes.

I thought about all of that as I cut up the Dole pineapple in my kitchen, and I heard again the psalmist's words in my head, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5). I was born, like all of you, into various unjust systems, and many of my decisions maintain and advance those systems, for better for me and for worse for others. Pineapple, coffee, tea, sugar, sneakers, smart phones – they all depend on sweatshop labor and migrant farm workers and dangerous working conditions that are largely unregulated. A few of us live in luxury – enjoying a wildly disproportionate share of the good stuff – while many struggle simply to survive. It's not right.

Jesus' first sign, according to John, was to turn water into wine, so that the party in the first century of this era might continue. As we continue to party on in the twenty-first century of this era – the era of our Lord, as we Christians have called it for so many centuries – do we do so in imitation of our Lord, who provided the good stuff for everyone, or are we maintaining our lives of luxury by perpetuating misery for many? What do you think our gated communities and the fight we're having about the wall on our southern border might be telling us about that?