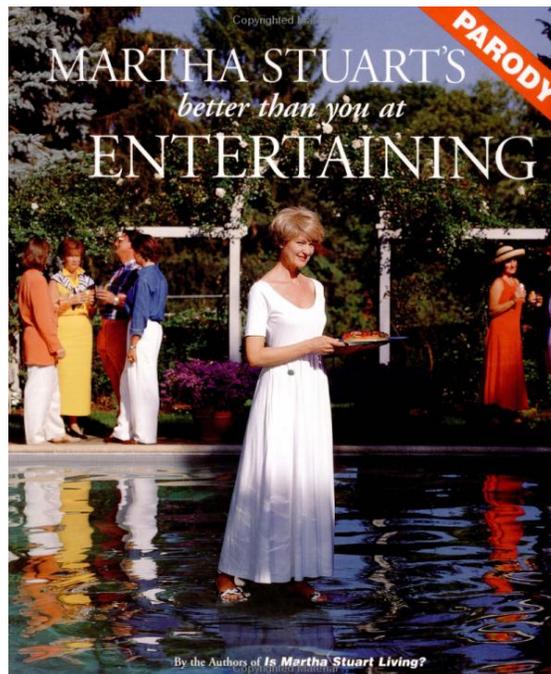


A Lovely Merlot

The Episcopal Church of All Saints, Indianapolis
Second Sunday in Epiphany
January 18, 2004
Charles W. Allen

John 2:1-11: 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.



In the year 3004 archeologists unearthed a fragment of this book: *Martha Stuart's Better Than You at Entertaining*.¹ Unfortunately, the cover was missing, and they didn't see the word "Parody" stamped across it, so they assumed that the sayings attributed to Martha were those preserved by a faithful remnant of devoted followers—people who had refused to believe the malicious accusations heaped upon her by her enemies. The discovery helped confirm their theory that the Cult of Martha, the Holy Martyr of Connecticut, began in her lifetime and that from the very earliest strands of tradition she was known as a wonder worker.

Of particular interest was the first chapter, where Martha describes the day she invited Pope John Paul George over for lunch. (There are no records of this Pope, so he must have been from an Old Catholic line.) Some time during the visit they decided to

¹ Tom O'Connor and Jim Downey, *Martha Stuart's Better Than You at Entertaining* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

trade recipes for turning water into wine. Martha decided to let the Pope go first. Here is her account, as best the archeologists could decipher it:

John Paul George must have been having a bad day because, try as he might, after about twenty minutes I was still looking at two glasses of water and a sorry excuse for a Pontiff. Here's my method: Start with good glassware and fresh, home-made water. Sit down, compose yourself, and remember that this is not a big deal. Concentrate on the water while saying to yourself, "This is only water, I made it, I can make it into something else." Then—and this may be the difficult part for the average person—I place my hands over the water and direct most but certainly not all of my powers through my fingertips. Through sheer force of will, I now insist that the water become wine—in this case, a lovely Merlot. I am always pleasantly pleased with the results.²

Scholars remained divided over whether these events actually happened. Those who belonged to the conservative wing of the Cult of Martha defended its authenticity, but others had their doubts. The skeptics pointed out that she never says whether she actually performed *that* miracle on *that* day. And furthermore, she doesn't really say that the water became a "lovely Merlot," but only that she's "always pleasantly pleased" with whatever does happen. So the more liberal members of her cult suggested that this was meant to be a symbolic story that inspires party throwers to give their best efforts. And so the debate continued, and all because they didn't know they were dealing with a parody.

Now the story I just told is also a parody. It's a parody of us and the story we just heard. Today some followers of the Cult of Jesus have just repeated a story about Jesus' recipe for turning water into wine. It all happens at a wedding party. We know that if Martha had been there the miracle would have been unnecessary, because she would never have let them run out of wine in the first place. But they did run out. Mary reports this to Jesus. Jesus says, "Well, so what?" But then with his mother's backing he tells the kitchen staff to fill some huge stone jars with water. And when the wine steward tastes it, he declares it to be "a lovely Merlot"—or words to that effect.

And like the future Cult of Martha, today's members of the Cult of Jesus tend to fall into conservative and liberal camps. If you doubt that this impromptu wine festival really happened, if you just want to interpret the story symbolically, the conservatives will try to shame you for having such a whittled-down faith—how could you even *question* what Jesus could do with water? After all, like Martha, couldn't Jesus simply say, "This is only water, I made it, I can make it into something else"?

And if you find yourself even entertaining the possibility that Jesus really did do this, or that he even *could* have done it, there are enlightened liberals even among the Cult of Jesus who will try to shame you for checking your brains at the church door—how could a *thinking* Christian ever see this story as more than just a symbol of God's generosity? Don't we know now that there are things that God just *can't* do?

Now of course the typical Anglican approach here is to try to please everybody by suggesting another angle. That doesn't always work. But maybe we don't have to choose between a whittled-down faith and a whittled-down brain. And of course I'm absolutely

² Ibid., p. 15.

certain, beyond any shadow of doubt, that this is the way John's Gospel invites us to look at things. John and the community he wrote for simply must have been the first Anglo-Catholics—they just didn't know it yet.

John's whole Gospel invites us into a world where all the things that seem to divide us are brought back together and reconciled. John shows us a God who lives as a reconciled community from the very beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This community of God, the Word, and their reconciling Spirit³ is what stands behind and supports every bit of the world you and I know—you and me, flesh and spirit, past and present, story and reality, bread and flesh, wine and blood, and, of course, wine and water. All these things are real in their own right—you're still you, and I'm still me—but in God's shared life with us all these things are so reconciled that any one of them can be a doorway to the other. You can pick up a cup of plain water and find yourself tasting "a lovely Merlot."

Now I'll be one of the first to admit that I'm one of those over-educated Christians who's too preoccupied with looking intelligent to even want to believe that Jesus went around performing tricks like the one we heard about today. But I'm not sure that makes me look any less gullible, because I can't help believing in the world John paints for us—a world filled with the presence of God's reconciling community everywhere I look.

And I suspect you can't help believing in that world either. Every week, when the presider says certain words, makes magical-looking gestures over bread and wine, and we receive them in quiet reverence, we may think that there's a lot of play-acting going on—and there certainly is. But I suspect most of us can't help believing that there's also a lot *more* going on here than just play-acting. It wouldn't be very Anglican to say just how that something more intersects with our play-acting, but John invites us to see it as nothing less than the reconciled community that God already is, touching our lives, drawing us in, and sending us out to touch other lives.

One of the things I especially like about John's Gospel is that, when Jesus calls himself living water, calls his flesh the bread of heaven, and speaks shamelessly about drinking his blood, he's not doing any of this at his last supper. He's outside the upper room, outside the church walls, bringing the sacraments to a world that isn't going to church. In today's lesson he's at a party. It's a wedding party, but they didn't have church or synagogue weddings back then. This party happens out in the world, not in church.

Those of us who spend so much time on Sunday morning liturgies could stand to remember that. What we do in here has no meaning if it doesn't open our eyes to the real presence of God's reconciling community in the world around us. Every act of generosity, of hospitality, is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace no matter where it occurs. Our official sacraments are pretty much the same sort of thing, only in a more concentrated form.

I suspect there won't really be a Cult of Martha in 3004, and if archeologists unearthed this parody about her they might not know who she is. But I'd very much like

³ Seeing the Spirit at work in John 1:1 is definitely reading backwards from a doctrinal position worked out over centuries. But I won't apologize for putting it that way.

to believe that they would recognize the echo of John's Gospel, because there would still be a Cult of Jesus bringing the sacraments to a world that still won't be going to church much more or less than it does today. I'm sure it would be a world even the most forward-looking of us would find strange and shocking. But it would still be a world filled with the presence of God's reconciled community, a world where you could still pick up a cup of water and find yourself tasting "a lovely Merlot." Amen.