

“The Good Wine”

John 2:1-11

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Right at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus went ... to a wedding. We don't know whose wedding it was; the names of the bride and groom have long been forgotten. We know the names of two of the guests – Jesus and his mother Mary – and nobody else. The wedding is remembered not because of who was getting married, or who was on the guest list, but because of *what happened*.

At this point, Jesus would have been about thirty years old. This wedding takes place not very long after Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River, probably shortly after Jesus's 40-day period of temptation in the wilderness that took place immediately following his baptism. As this story begins, he has as of yet performed no miracles; he has done nothing yet to reveal his identity as God's beloved Son.

I am very struck by the fact that we know *nothing* about Jesus's adult life prior to his baptism. What was Jesus like in his 20's? We're told that he was a carpenter, like his adoptive father Joseph, but we are given no other details. Did he have friends? Did he enjoy having a drink with his buddies? Had he ever had a girlfriend? It would have been extremely rare for a man in that culture not to be married by the time they were 30 years old. What relationships did he have? Who was special to him in his life?

He must have had *some* friends, because he receives an invitation to this wedding, along with his mother Mary. There is no mention of Joseph anywhere; it is generally believed that he had passed away sometime earlier in Jesus's life. There *is* mention of Jesus's disciples; by this point he had begun to call certain people to follow him – Simon Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael are the ones who have been named so far in John's Gospel. The wedding is in a village called Cana, a few miles from Nazareth.

There is a very old legend that Mary was a relative of either the bride or groom; one version of that legend says that Mary was the groom's aunt. That's just speculation, but it would explain why Mary is present at a wedding in Cana, which was not her hometown. Another theory is that Nathanael was a friend of the groom, for later on in John's Gospel we are told that Nathanael was from Cana. Whatever the connections may have been, Jesus, some of his followers, and his mother all attend this wedding.

Weddings in biblical times were grand affairs. We know from the book of Judges and the book of Tobit (in the Apocrypha) that, at least in some cases, wedding festivities lasted seven days. A whole week! That would require a generous supply of wine. Galilee is very fertile; grapes grow in abundance; ordinarily there would be plenty of wine. But, on this occasion, there wasn't enough. Maybe the guests were drinking more than normal; maybe there were more guests than the groom and his family had planned for; maybe there just wasn't enough wine on hand in the first place. Mary notices that they have run out. She says to Jesus, “They have no wine.” She doesn't ask him to do anything about that; it

appears to have just been a simple statement of fact. “They have no wine.” Remember, at this point in the Gospel story Jesus has performed no miracles, and there would have been no expectation on anybody’s part that he *would* perform any. There were no prophecies anywhere in the Jewish scriptures saying that the Messiah would perform miracles on behalf of individual people. But ... did Mary sense something everybody else didn’t know? Did she believe that the time had come for her son to *shine*?

Jesus asks his mother: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” Literally, he says: “Woman, what to you and to me?” It is an idiomatic phrase, showing up a number of times in the Bible, hard to translate into English. In this context it simply seems to mean something like: “That’s *your* problem. It’s not *mine*. Why are you telling me about this?” Some people think that Jesus addressing his mother as “Woman” implies some kind of rebuke, as if Mary has done something wrong and Jesus is chastising her, but that’s probably an over-interpretation. Jesus often addresses women in this manner; the word “woman” in these cases seems to mean something like “Ma’am,” and is a term of respect. So Jesus’s words to Mary probably meant something like this: “Ma’am, I understand that’s important to you, but what do I have to do with it?” It was a friendly question. Don’t read too much into it.

What Jesus says next is much more significant: “My hour has not yet come.” He says this as if to explain why he doesn’t feel a need to get involved. His “hour” has not yet come. Many words in the John’s Gospel are loaded with meaning; “hour” is one of them. Several times in the early part of John, Jesus refers to an “hour” that is coming, and John the Gospel-writer says several times that Jesus’s “hour had not yet come.” But this changes later on; once Jesus is in Jerusalem and the Passover celebration is coming and his death is near, he declares, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:23). John adds, “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.” (John 13:1) At the Last Supper, Jesus prays, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.” (John 17:1) The “hour” that Jesus is referring to is the time of his passion, death, and resurrection. So when he says to Mary, “My hour has not yet come,” he is thinking about the climax of his earthly ministry. Here we are, practically at the very beginning. Jesus’s hour has not yet come.

Nevertheless ... Jesus *is* going to do something about the shortage of wine. His mother seems to intuitively *know* this. She does not know *how* he is going to solve this problem, but she knows that he *will*. This is her son, in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells, the Holy Spirit that descended upon him from heaven at his baptism. He has power that the world has not yet seen. He is about to reveal some of that power for the very first time. Mary senses this. She says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

“Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification.” They would have looked something like these ancient jars that are on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. These were large jars; each could hold approximately 20 to 30 gallons of water. These were used, as John says, for Jewish purification rituals. They weren’t there for the wedding! Jesus instructs the servants to fill them with water. Then he said, “Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet.” So the servants dip a cup into one of the jars, and take the cup to the person in charge. He tastes it ... and it is not water any more. Those stone jars are now holding about 120 gallons of wine.

This was the first time Jesus had used his spiritual power in public. It was his first miracle.

The man in charge of the banquet is amazed. He doesn’t realize that a miracle has happened; he just thinks that the groom had kept some wine tucked away, in reserve. But this wine tastes

especially good; it is much more flavorful than what the wedding guests have been drinking up till now. “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk,” he says; “but you have kept the good wine until now.” He doesn’t know it, but he is speaking a deep theological truth. For Jesus himself will be the “cup of salvation;” his blood will be shed to give new life to all of us; we represent that blood every time we celebrate communion with grape juice or wine. Jesus himself is, metaphorically speaking, the “good wine” that has been kept in reserve until now. Before him have come many, *many* other prophets, who all pointed people towards God. They were all good, “tasty” in their own way, if you will; but Jesus surpasses them all. God has kept the *good* wine until now.

So Jesus attended a wedding. Not just the wedding, but the party too. There was a lot of wine – and Jesus made a whole lot more! If anyone is wondering whether it’s okay for Christians to drink, well, this story should answer that question. Some Christian traditions say we should refrain from all alcohol – but that teaching doesn’t jive well with this story. Jesus himself drank wine – there are some specific references to that in the Gospels – and Jesus clearly had no objection to other people drinking. Why would he make *more* wine, if he didn’t want people to drink it? The New Testament repeatedly tells us to avoid *drunkenness* – but there is nothing spiritually wrong with drinking, in moderation.

The point of the story, though, isn’t about the wedding, and it isn’t about the wine. The point of the story is about Jesus himself. This was, as John says, “the first of his signs.” “Sign” is another word with deep significance; in the Gospel of John, there are seven specific signs that Jesus performs as his ministry unfolds: changing water into wine (2:1-11); curing a nobleman’s son (4:46-54); healing a paralytic (5:1-15); feeding the five thousand (6:1-14); walking on water (6:15-21); opening the eyes of a blind man (9:1-41); and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:38-44). All these miracles that Jesus performs point beyond themselves to a deeper truth: the truth about Jesus himself. “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and *revealed his glory*.” Jesus revealed that he is not just an ordinary human. There is something uniquely *special* about Jesus, something *majestic*, something *grand*, something *glorious*. Jesus has a glory that is uniquely his. He is the only-begotten Son of Almighty God.

Why does the revelation of that glory matter? Well, it makes people *believe* in him. Jesus “revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” When they beheld what Jesus could do, when they perceived that there was a power working in him that came from none other than Almighty God, it motivated and inspired people to believe in Jesus, to place their trust in him. It made people willing to leave behind their former way of life, and follow where Jesus would lead. It inspired people to bring their loved ones to Jesus for healing. It motivated people to listen to his teachings, his words of truth. It caused people to reflect on their life, their priorities, their dreams and goals and aspirations, and make some changes. It brought them hope that there was more to this world than what we can see and hear and touch and taste and smell. There is a Messiah! A Savior! A Lord! And he’s *right here!*

So the invitation to believe in him is for *us* as well. We weren’t at that wedding; we didn’t see that sign. But John the Gospel-writer makes his intentions plain. Near the very end of his Gospel, he says: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But *these* are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31) That is the purpose of this story: to help us *have life*. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

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