

Third Sunday after the Epiphany; January 22, 2023
+ John 2:1-11 +
"Jesus Gives Us a Wonderful Sign"

Three days later, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no wine."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with you and me? My time has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Six stone water jars, which the Jews used for ceremonial cleansing, were standing there, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." So they filled them to the brim. Then he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." And they did.

When the master of the banquet tasted the water that had now become wine, he did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew). The master of the banquet called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when the guests have had plenty to drink, then the cheaper wine. You saved the good wine until now!"

This, the beginning of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Have you ever been to wedding that was memorable for the wrong reason? Maybe the best man was a bit overserved before he gave his speech, and mentioned a few things he should not have. Or maybe your cousin who cannot dance (but totally thinks he can) made a spectacle of himself. Nobody wants their wedding to be remembered for things like that. Everyone wants their wedding and reception to be perfect, remembered for all the right reasons.

Jesus and at least six of disciples attend a wedding in a small town called Cana. In this culture, the wedding ceremony itself is usually held in the house of the bride's parents, and the reception in the home of the groom's family. We are used to wedding receptions lasting a few hours; theirs lasted days, sometimes longer than a week.

Jesus' mother Mary is not only there, but she appears to be an honored guest. The honored guests helped run the reception, and she knows right away that the wine is gone. So Jesus' family and the groom's family are probably very close. So this wedding celebration is important not just to the bride and groom, but also to Mary.

And it's about to become memorable for a wrong reason. It's about to be one of those weddings that make people shake their heads years later when they remember it. Running out of wine is a major social blunder. How could the groom's family make such a mistake? Maybe they underestimated that number of guests who would come. Maybe they weren't expecting Mary's son to come with a half dozen or more of his disciples! But whatever the reason, the mistake has been made. And it's going to be embarrassing.

Many people who comment on this story are quite harsh with Mary. I don't think we need to be. Mary does what all believers in Jesus should: she takes her problem (and it's her problem, too, because she's helping run this reception!) to Jesus.

It is true that Mary and Jesus have slightly different goals. Mary's main goal is to save the reception. Jesus' main goal on this day is to reveal his glory to his disciples in just the right way and just the right time. This is probably the best way to understand Jesus' answer when Mary informs him: **"They have no wine."** Jesus knows there is a need, and he wants to help. But it has to be in the right way and at the right time. So he answers: **"Woman, what does that have to with you and me? My time has not yet come."**

Even after being told she must wait, Mary's faith that Jesus will fix things does not waver. **His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."** And Jesus does help, when the time is right. And helps in the way that also allows him to reveal his glory in the right way. At this early stage in his ministry, it's not yet time to display his power in large public settings, but only to his disciples. So he provides wine in a way that allows only a few people, including his disciples, to know about.

But he does help in the end. And does he ever! Somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of wine! Just visualize 150 gallon milk cartons in a pyramid. That's a whole lot of wine. And this disturbs some people. Is Jesus trying to get people drunk? No. This is a long reception, probably with a lot of guests. And there's no requirement to drink it all before the party breaks up. Jesus is just being generous with his help.

And it's not just the quantity of the wine; it's the quality, too. **The master of the banquet called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when the guests have had plenty to drink, then the cheaper wine. You saved the good wine until now!"** This also bothers some people, because it sounds like Jesus is complicit in overserving the guests of this banquet. But a close look at what the banquet master says shows that's not true. He's just saying how refreshingly different this reception is from most. The master of the banquet doesn't know why this quality wine has come out late; he thinks the groom has planned it this way, which of course he has not.

The good stuff comes out late because Jesus helps. He does it when the time was right, and so that only a few people knew about it. Because this miracle, this early in his ministry, is to benefit just a few. And here's how this first miracle blessed them: **This, the beginning of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.** St. John calls the miracle a "sign." It's easy to understand why, if we just consider what signs do. They point to things and tell you about them. This miracle, this sign, is an arrow over Jesus' head pointing up to heaven: "That's where I'm from. And that's who I am."

It was only three days earlier that Jesus called these disciples. He chose them to believe in him and to follow him. But these men, like all sinners, have faith that will never be perfect. In the end all of them (except Judas and the writer of this Gospel) will follow Jesus in faith all the way to martyrdom. But they are sinners; even their faith, and even their following of Jesus, will never be perfect. They need Jesus' signs so their faith in him will grow and their discipleship will be firmer.

So Jesus gives them this sign, and many more. And he gives them to us, too. Because we believe in Jesus, but never perfectly. And we follow him, but never with perfection. So we need to see in this miracle, and in all the miracles to come in Jesus' ministry, a sign pointing up. Jesus has the power to produce 150 gallons of exquisite wine out of impure water because he comes from heaven. He does it because he is God himself. Look at this, and every miraculous sign, and look up. That's why Jesus turns water into wine, and opens blind eyes and deaf ears, and stiffens powerless legs, and drives out demons, and even raises the dead: to point our eyes up to heaven, remembering where he comes from and who he is.

But this sign, and every miraculous sign, point to more than Jesus' deity. They teach us other things about him, too. So, what other truths about Jesus does this sign point to?

This sign points to the truth that Jesus cares about what we need -- and even what we want! Did the bride and groom need, in the true sense of the word, more wine? Not in the true sense of the word. And in the grand scheme of things, how important was that wine? Not very. Yes, they would have been embarrassed. But it would not have ended the world.

But it was important to them at that moment. And it was important to Mary. And so it became important to Jesus. And the same is true for all of Jesus' followers. If a thing is important to us -- even though it may not be a need or all that important in the grand scheme -- then it matters to him. And he will listen when we ask for it, just as he listened to Mary.

And why wouldn't he? This sign, and every sign, points from Jesus to heaven so we will remember that he is God's almighty Son. And why did the Son of God wrap himself in our flesh and come into the world? Because he cares about us enough to save us. He does more than care about us; he loves us with eternal love that climbs down from heaven's throne to join us here, in this fallen world. He loves us enough to walk in the darkness of this world without ever touching it, in order to save us from our sin. He loves us enough to take the one thing he hates most of all -- our sin -- on to himself on the cross. What do you hate the most? Let's say it's spiders. How much would you have to love someone to let yourself be covered in spiders for them? Well, Jesus hates sin the most. And he loves us enough to let himself be covered in our sin on the cross to pay for it and take it all away. He loves us enough to be buried in the earth he created and then come out alive again, so that we will too.

So it safe to conclude that Jesus loves us and cares about us enough to listen to us when we need, or even just want, something from him. We know it from all he did to save us, and we know it from this story of him changing water into wine. He cares and listens. So when you are in that position, do what Mary did and be bold to take it to him. He's going to listen. He cares, no matter what it is.

And this sign also points to this truth about Jesus: as he did for Mary, he is going to answer you the right way at the right time. Mary and Jesus do have slightly different interests on this day. As an honored guest, her main goal is to relieve embarrassment by getting more wine. Jesus' main purpose is to reveal his glory to just a few at just the right time. So Mary did not get what she wanted immediately; she had to wait a bit. But when Jesus came through, he came through spectacularly. Lots of wine. Lots of really good wine.

But you may say: when I take my needs and wants to Jesus, he doesn't always come through so stunningly! I usually don't get 150 gallons of anything! This thinking is so silly and wrong. Jesus does come through for you spectacularly every time you take a need or want to him. Because maybe that thing you think you need, you don't need. Maybe it will in fact be bad for you in some way. Or maybe you need to learn that you don't really need it after all. Whatever his reasons, if he doesn't give you what you think you need, he is giving you what is better. Not just better. Best.

And this remains true every time we go to Jesus for help. Every time he answers us just as he answered Mary: with the best thing for us, at the time he knows is just right.

Jesus' brand new disciples need this sign -- and every sign -- to strengthen their faith in Jesus and to firm them up to follow him more closely. Jesus disciples here need this sign -- and every miraculous sign -- for

just the same reasons. We watch Jesus turn water into 150 gallons of tasty wine, and see an arrow pointing straight up. This man comes from heaven. He's more than a man; he is the man who is also God.

But this sign points us to even more truth about Jesus. He loves us so deeply that cares about every need and even every want. And he loves us so deeply that he comes through in the right way at the right time every time.

So do what Jesus' disciples did: put your faith in him and follow him. And never hesitate to do what Mary did: take everything to Jesus. He loves you and will help you in his perfect way and time. Amen.