

“A Wedding Saved ”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 2.1-12

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On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.

When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “What are you trying to do with me, woman? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Whatever he tells you to do, do it.”

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it.

When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people are light-headed, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

John 2.1-12

Adapted from the English Standard Version

It was only a wedding.

If all the things wrong in the world were stones, then a spoiled wedding is just a pebble.

But it was their wedding. Their big day. Their looming disaster.

Then, even more than now, weddings were family productions. This failure would be a social shame, not just for the Mr. and the Mrs., but the whole clan. Folks would wonder, and the couple would fear, that this terrible beginning was just the beginning.¹

¹ N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004)

Here's the first thing we can learn from this episode. It was only a wedding, but it was their wedding. It is like saying it is only a small tumour. Yes, many people suffer worse, but it is her tumour, her burden to bear. It is like saying it is only a small heartbreak. Yes, many suffer more, but those are his tears. Comparing calamities might have its place, but not if it lets us dismiss someone's sorrow as somehow unimportant. Small sorrows matter to God.

It was only a wedding, but when the wine ran out. . . .

II

Mary noticed. I'm not sure what to make of the exchange between Jesus and his mom. The words on the page don't convey the tone of voice, so we can only imagine. Still, to me Jesus sounds testy and dismissive, edgy.²

She sees a need: the wine is finished, the wedding in danger. She tells him. Is she asking Jesus to do something? He thinks so, but Jesus says no, it's not time yet.

So she says to the wait-staff, *"Whatever he tells you to do, do it."*

We can learn something about discipleship here, and the struggle of following Jesus. *"Whatever he tells you to do, do it."* Does she have any idea what Jesus has planned? No. Have his words given her any reason to expect something? No. Mary sees a real crisis. Yet Jesus seems indifferent, unmoved, unhelpful. He has turned away, treated her like a stranger.

Ever feel that way with God? God seeming indifferent, unmoved, unhelpful? God seeming to have turned away? God acting like a stranger?³

Martin Luther, the great Christian reformer, says *"This is where faith stands in the heat of battle."* He continues: *"Now observe how [Mary acts and] becomes our teacher. However harsh [Jesus'] words sound, however unkind he appears, she does not in her heart interpret this as anger, or as the opposite of kindness, but adheres firmly to the conviction that he is kind."*⁴

² Jesus calls Mary, Woman! Then again, Jesus would call her that once more, at his dying, in a moment of obvious tenderness and care. *"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home."* (John 19:26). So this first time, at the wedding, it likely did not carry the same sting I imagine. See Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 129.

³ Martin Luther said, "Now observe the nature of faith. What has it to rely on? Absolutely nothing, all is darkness. It feels its need and sees help nowhere; in addition, God turns against it like a stranger and does not recognize it, so that absolutely nothingness is left. It is the same way with our conscience when we feel our sin and lack of righteousness; or in the agony of death when we feel the lack of life; or in the dread of hell when eternal salvation seems to have left us . . ." Quoted in Bruner, 138.

⁴ This quote continues from the one in note 3.

“Whatever he tells you to do, do it.” Mary does not know what that might be, if anything. Still, she knows Jesus. She trusts him.

Following Jesus means whatever he tells me to do, I will do it. Often without knowing anything else, except who Jesus is, and that he is kind, and worth trusting.

III

You know what happens next. *“The water became wine.”* Just four words. No description. No waving of hands or flash of smoke. Just four words mention it, almost in passing. Everything here is understated.

The raw material Jesus uses is basic. Water, kept for the ceremonial cleansing that was part of everyday life.⁵ Water, basic to life. It is with normal creation-stuff that God makes miracles.⁶

The instructions Jesus gives are basic. Fill . . . draw . . . take. . . . Fill the vessels to the top. Draw some water out. Take it to the man in charge. Fill . . . draw . . . take. . . .⁷ Ordinary jars. Ordinary water. Ordinary instructions.

Here is another lesson. We do the simple things. Jesus does the salvation things.⁸ Whatever parts we get to play in what God is doing, they will usually be simple, commonly ordinary, and always minor compared to what God does. Yes, God includes us. Jesus does not do it all himself. Still, that which matters most and makes all the difference, he does.

“The water became wine.”

Only a few know. The master of the feast does not know. Still, he gets to taste the results. The groom has no idea what has gone on. Still, he gets praised for being such an extravagant host. The couple has had disaster averted for them, yet they are unaware of

⁵ Many commentators have found find meaning in the detail that these water containers were for Jewish rituals. The common interpretation is that Jesus’ action signifies the replacement of traditions of Judaism (judged negatively, or at least no longer relevant), with the freedom and vitality of the Gospel. I am not convinced, and sense in this interpretation the anti-Judaic assumptions that have plagued much of Christian biblical interpretation. Was the Gospel writer (“John”) himself anti-Judaic? Perhaps; I think an answer to this must be much more nuanced than a simple “yes or “no.” Still, I see nothing in this passage that demands or even suggests a supersessionist reading that denigrates or relegates Judaism.

I suspect that John includes details about the water jars for a reason, more than simply adding narrative colour. What does it mean? Perhaps there is significance that Jesus uses and transforms the materials of his own Jewish practices. Yes, he is doing something remarkably and wonderfully new, which grows out of the old. Or, maybe it simply underlines the ordinary, close-at-hand nature of the water he employs.

⁶ “Minimally, our text can teach us that Jesus uses what is at hand, what is there — ordinary creation realities — in order to do his extraordinary re-creation signs.” Bruner, 131.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

their deliverance. All the guests know is that the wine has gotten very good.

Here is still another lesson. Most of what God does is understated and unknown. Just because I don't see what God is doing, or that God is doing anything, is beside the point. That's what I should expect. Do I trust God when, most of the time, I don't know?

IV

Another lesson: God loves a celebration.

That's what God made all creation for. A celebration of energy and matter, radiance and wonder. An earth, teeming with life. People, crafted in God's image to share in God's rejoicing. God delights in our delighting. God rejoices in our wonder. God cheers our discoveries. God smiles at our moments of compassion, our gestures of grace, our outpourings of love.

God loves a celebration.

So when the celebration is imperiled, when the "party is poopered," when the wine runs out, God does not stand by, arms crossed.

"The water became wine."

The Gospel-writer, John, tells us that this is the first sign Jesus did. "Signs" is the word John uses for what we call miracles. A sign points us to something else; that something else is what we need to pay attention to. Tom Wright says it's like John has left clues throughout his account, signs that point us to Jesus and who he is.⁹ So look at the sign, then look to whom it points. Along with the bride and groom, you can sip the wine, and wonder at the Winemaker. With Mary, you can notice the crisis, and turn to the Guest for help. With the servants, you can do whatever you are told, and trust the Master who tells you.¹⁰

Maybe this water-into-wine sign comes first so it can give us a key to understand everything else Jesus does.¹¹ John tells us about seven signs of Jesus.¹² Listen to them:

A sick child, Jesus heals.

A paralyzed man, Jesus makes to walk.

A small amount of bread, Jesus uses to feed a hungry crowd.

⁹ Wright, 21.

¹⁰ Adapted from Bruner, 133.

¹¹ Bruner, 141. Perhaps an analogy for this is naming of a class of warships in the Canadian Navy. The first one in the class is named, and the entire class carries that name. The first defines the class. So, for instance, the HMCS Halifax was the first commissioned in the Halifax class of 12 frigates (the others being *Vancouver*, *Ville de Québec*, *Toronto*, *Regina*, *Calgary*, *Montréal*, *Fredericton*, *Winnipeg*, *Charlottetown*, *St. John's*, *Ottawa*).

¹² Seven was thought to signify perfection. John does not tell us every sign Jesus did (20:30), just seven.

A stormy sea, Jesus walks upon.
A blind man, Jesus makes to see.
A dead man, Jesus makes to rise.
And, to start it off, water Jesus turns into wine, and saves a wedding celebration.

Jesus restores celebration. He is taking the ordinary and creating the extraordinary. He is mending us who are wounded, binding us who are broken, forgiving us who are guilty, stilling us who are storm-tossed, feeding us who are starving, restoring life to us who are dead. Where there is scarcity, he is creating abundance. Where there is shame, he is giving honour.

This first sign points us to everything that comes, all that follows, all that Jesus has done, will do, is doing now.

Remember. Most at that wedding did not see it. But he did it. And he is still doing it.

Remember. Mary had every reason to give up. But she knew her son. She trusted Jesus.

John ends with this: *"This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory."* He showed us who he is and what he's about. *"And his disciples believed in him."* They entrusted themselves to Jesus.

Yes, it was only a wedding. But what a beginning! And the celebration, by God's grace, never stops! Amen!