

John 2:1-11

More Than Enough

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Weddings are a big deal. Getting married is a big deal. My philosophy around weddings is to do my best to help the couple have the wedding they have dreamed about, even when what they want isn't my favorite. I've been a minister long enough to know that every couple is different and what is important to one couple doesn't matter at all to the next. One couple I married, when I asked them what the most important thing about the day was, the bride quickly said, "To start on time." Apparently, they had been to a wedding that was literally hours late starting. I made a note and promised her I would make that happen.

The day of the wedding, I got to the church about an hour and a half before the ceremony, checked on both the bride and groom, all was well, so I went to my office. Shortly before it was time to start, I put on my robe and walked into the centrum where there was a very long line. It stretched from the sanctuary all the way out, almost to the main entrance. I followed the line to see what the hold up was. It was the guest book. The bride had divided the guest book by each letter of the alphabet, and she had instructed the guest book attendant, who looked miserable by the way, to have everyone sign in on the page that corresponded with their last name. It was taking forever. All the flipping through the pages and singing of the alphabet song to get to the right page was super cumbersome. I looked at my watch. The wedding was supposed to start in 5 minutes. There were 75 people in line at least.

I went to the bride's room, remembering that the most important thing about the day was to start on time. I told her what was happening and explained that if she stuck to her guest book plan, we would not start on time. I told her we could either start late or I could go out and tell her guests that the guest book would be available for signing at the reception and to please have a seat. True to her word, she said to have them sit down. I did and we started on time.

I've officiated weddings where the most important thing was a certain song, pouring sand into a bottle, writing their own vows, and even the way in which the couple was introduced at the end. To be honest, very often, the most important

thing to the couple has nothing to do with the ceremony or the church or even me. On many occasions, the most important thing to the couple is the party afterward. Today's text is the story of such a party. This is John 2:1-11:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So, they took it. ⁹ 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 ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

I said this a couple weeks ago, but a lot of y'all were sleeping in the day after Christmas and it's important enough that it bears repeating. The Gospel of John came out of a community of Jewish Mystics. This community was different, not only from Gentile (non-Jewish) communities, but also from traditional Jewish communities. It is probable, in fact, that the writers and the original readers of this book had been ex-communicated from their Jewish community. As we read this book, we will notice that the writers are very critical of Jewish leaders in places. We will be careful to remember not to interpret this text in ways that are anti-Semitic, but through the eyes of Jewish people who have basically been called heretics and asked to leave a community. Their criticism is with the leaders, not the faith tradition.

One of the scholars my sermons will engage as we learn about this text is an Episcopalian Bishop, John Shelby Spong. In his book, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, he wrote this about Jewish mysticism, "Jewish mysticism was never a majority movement inside Judaism. As mysticism tends to be everywhere, it was resisted and resented by the hierarchy of Jewish priesthood and marginalized in

the traditional Jewish community.”¹ Throughout our study of the Gospel of John, we will see that Christianity has, at times, tragically distorted the book by interpreting it literally, even though the very idea of something being mystical means that words cannot adequately capture it. So, as we move along this winter, we will be talking a lot about symbols, multiple interpretations, and how those interpretations have affected our own faith tradition. I hope you will talk to me about what resonates with you, what troubles you, and what surprises you about the texts we will read and learn about together.

With that in mind, let’s begin with an interpretation of today’s text that will encourage us to see it through the eyes of the Jewish mystics and considering the overarching story of the Gospel of John. First, the story begins with “On the third day...” Here’s a pop quiz: Can you think of another story about Jesus where something important happens on the third day? Anyone? Bueller (that is a reference to a 1986 movie: *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*)? The story of Jesus’s resurrection happened “on the third day” after his death. So, right away, we know this story of the beginning of Jesus’s ministry foreshadows the end. These two stories, the Wedding at Cana and the Resurrection, act as book ends or brackets in the Gospel of John. Everything in between points to the ultimate revelation of God, which for this community of Jewish mystics, was Jesus’s activity on the cross.

In the story, Jesus’s mother is the one who noticed there was a wine problem. She quietly mentioned it to Jesus who responded, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” How many moms in this room would appreciate being talked to that way? How many of us would have gotten away with addressing our mom, “Woman?” I did some research on the tone Jesus took with his mother and whether that was the norm. It turns out, referring to other women as “woman” would not necessarily have been out of line in Jesus’s day, but calling your own mother “woman” was not a thing, even then. So, why might the authors have chosen to leave her unnamed?

Jesus’s mother only appears twice in this Gospel, in this story and at the foot of the cross. Both times she is called Jesus’s mother (and not Mary) and both times Jesus addresses her, “Woman.” Knowing there is rich symbolism present here, what can we learn about what this community believed about Jesus and, by extension, God? Bishop Spong writes, “The symbols are obvious. This

¹ Spong, John Shelby, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 2013, 53.

transformation of water into wine will occur 'on the third day.' There are six jars present that are meant to be used for Jewish purification. The mother of Jesus stands at the nexus between the shortcomings of the ritual activity of the Jews and the celebration of new life that Jesus came to bring---new life that is symbolized by the wedding celebration."² What Spong wants us to do is imagine the writers of John used the character of Jesus's mother, not as a real person, but as a symbol. His claim is that she is a symbol for Israel itself. He writes, "Clearly in this story Jesus is the bridegroom...He is calling Israel into a new status...Who then is the mother of the Lord?" Spong continues, "I submit that, as she is developed in the Fourth Gospel, she is a mythological figure who stands for Israel, the faith tradition that gave birth to Christianity, and thus is its mother."

This interpretation is probably far afield from what you have considered in the past. What I want us to remember is that over the years Christianity has cherry-picked bits and pieces of ancient texts and created creeds, doctrines, rules, and traditions based on them, sometimes ignoring the context from which they come and forgetting that each gospel presents a different portrait of Jesus, different themes, and a very different theology. Instead of celebrating that and trying to learn from it, instead of appreciating that the literature in the Bible is a collection of different genres, Christianity tried to mash all of it together, like when we slip the Magi into the nativity scenes. Interpretations matters, not so we can declare ourselves right or wrong, but because how we interpret the Bible says something about what we believe about God, humanity, and all of creation. Multiple plausible interpretations are possible, but always the texts must be read through the lenses of love and inclusion. God is love and God loves everybody. All biblical texts should be interpreted with that as a given.

Having said that, let's pivot toward a more traditional interpretation of this text, still very much about symbols, but with a different focus.

To begin, "Why a wedding?"

What is it about a wedding that would make for a great moment for the authors of John to introduce Jesus's public ministry to the readers? First, don't tell couples planning to get married this, but weddings are really pretty ordinary. Most of us end up going to many of them throughout our lifetime. Some of us have quite a collection of bridesmaids dresses we will never wear again. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus's first miraculous event was an exorcism...now that is not something you

² Spong, 83.

experience very often. That is, indeed, extraordinary. Through this story of an ordinary event, Jesus introduced the presence of God into the day to day-ness of life.

Second, weddings are a celebration of relationship. The relationship being celebrated was different in the first century Mediterranean world in which Jesus and the original readers of this text lived than it is today. We celebrate the love God has grown between two people, the two people getting married. The relationship celebrated 2000 years ago was the relationship between two families. Whether or not the couple loved each other was not really that important. So, this first sign pointed to these two things: Our God cares about the everyday stuff and relationships are important and should be celebrated.

But there is more. In Jesus's day, weddings lasted for days, as long as a week. The expectation was that there would be an abundance of wine that would last until the end of the celebration. It was the responsibility of the host to ensure there was enough and it would have been unacceptable to run out. That would have been the thing everyone in Cana remembered about this wedding. "Hey, Ari, remember when the Hoffman's oldest daughter got married and they ran out of wine? Nobody will ever forget that." Jesus was not the host of this wedding. He was a guest, as was his mother. It was definitely not their responsibility to make sure there was enough wine. Yet, Jesus and his mother would have known what running out of wine would have meant for the hosts. Ancient Jewish communities revolved around a system of honor and shame. The actions of each person either brought honor or shame to their family. Running out of wine would have brought shame to the host family.

In this story, though, Jesus did more than just make sure they didn't run out of wine. Suddenly there was abundance. The six stone jars of water would have yielded about a thousand bottles of wine. And when the wine was brought to the steward, it was not just wine. It was the best wine. This was unheard of. Anyone who has ever served wine knows that you always start the party with the good stuff. You don't bring the good wine out mid-party. By then, people have had enough wine that they can't appreciate the good wine and they will literally drink anything.

This is the kind of God we have. We are loved by a God of abundance and promise. According to Dr. Karoline Lewis, “It is a sign of abundance that manifests what grace upon grace tastes like. It tastes like the best wine, more than you could possibly want or drink, when you least expect it.”³ Or to put it into perspective for the non-wine drinkers among us, it tastes like the last chocolate in the box when you expect it to be the kind with the yucky white filling and you bite into it, and it’s filled with caramel. And then you open the cupboard and find another box that is all caramel.

And, “It is a sign of promise because the best is saved for last.”⁴ There is a promise of new life in this sign, that life goes beyond the here and now, relationships can be restored, all of creation will be made whole.

We can understand this story as a glimpse of what God’s hope and vision for us and for all of creation is like. The kin-dom of God invites the whole community to celebrate at a banquet where there is more than enough to go around and there is a place set for every one of us. Everyone eats, everyone drinks, there is joy, there is honor, there is life, and there is love.

I will end this morning with some words that I’ve enjoyed reflecting on this week. This was initially written as a prayer, by Pastor Katy Stenta. She gave me permission to use it and to tweak it. My version ended up, rather than a prayer, a letter to Jesus.

Dear Jesus,

Today, as I think about the story of the Wedding at Cana,

I wonder if you shared some insecurities with your mom,

If you told her you had to leave home and start to do all the dangerous things she sang about when she was pregnant and went to see Elizabeth.

And I wonder if you had imposter syndrome

Because you were—after all, fully human,

I wonder if you whispered that you didn’t want to leave home

or if you worried about leaving your brothers and sisters

when Joseph is so conspicuously absent from the storyline now.

You, the eldest, the man of the house,

would be leaving too, just to cause a revolution.

³ Lewis, 39.

⁴ Lewis, 39.

I wonder if your mom wanted to give you a good memory to start your journey...

I can just imagine

how you looked, Jesus, when you were like,

“Seriously Woman, this is not what God’s power is for!”

And your mom, didn’t even respond to that.

I just imagine the *Mom Look* she gave you.

I’d love to have seen that.

Because aren’t those *Mom Looks* affirming of all that we are, and can be—
they are the opposite of imposter syndrome, are they not?

She gave the *Mom Look* and then told the servants,

“You will do as my son says” and gave a grand exit,

Beginning your ministry with a flourish...of hospitality.

It started with a party, it started as we will see it end—with the outpouring of wine. There is no formal communion narrative in the Gospel of John, but it fits in right here at the wedding.

And 2000 years later, as the people of God argue about what real ministry is and what the Church really ought to be, this story tells us all we need to know:

You turned water into wine,

you know the truth—it’s all real,

every drop of hospitality and communion and identity affirmation, it is all real ministry, and it is who we are when we are at our best. Don’t ever let us forget that.

Love, one who truly seeks you and your ways.

Amen.