First Miracle - Wine at a Wedding

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John 2:1-11 January 21, 2024

Today’s scripture from John is the third assigned lectionary passage for Epiphany, the story of Jesus’ first miracle - turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Since I have been teaching the gospel of John this year on Thursday mornings, I decided the next few sermons will explore several of Jesus’ miracles in the gospel of John. Each of these miracles of Jesus reveals something about who Jesus is as son of God and savior of the world. That is the point of Epiphany – revealing God, showing who God.

Today’s reading is an interesting choice for first miracle. On the surface, it doesn’t seem a particularly appropriate setting for a revelation from God. It wasn’t healing a bunch of people, feeding a multitude, stopping a war, preventing a tragedy. It was just providing barrels of wine for a party. Below the surface, this miracle teaches about the importance of family, community, connection, honor, responsibility and joy – finding and creating joy in life. This miracle points us in the direction of everything that holds us together as a society, everything of value. It reminds us that life is a gift from a loving God. This miracle calls us to consider others and to do the right thing. It reminds us to have fun and to care for others.

Weddings in Biblical times were even bigger than now. They represented the formal joining of families as allies – pledging a Covenant of care and support. Promising to help each other in difficult times. A wedding usually lasted about a week and entire villages were invited. It was a matter of honor for the families to feed and welcome anyone who came – everyone who came. Failure to provide for all guests could result in great shame for the families. Worse it could be considered a breach of contract and could nullify the entire wedding – you didn’t provide for my friends so obviously you can’t provide for your family and won’t be a good ally for us. Not doing a good job on the wedding provisions could be considered reason to call off the wedding. To make sure everything went well, whenever there was an upcoming wedding, friends and family all contributed supplies during the entire engagement period to ensure enough provisions. If a host ran out of food or wine, it might be considered that they did not have enough friends or family to provide support. That would bring shame to the family and to the wedding.

There is some speculation that perhaps Jesus is somehow related to the bride or groom in this story. Mary’s request to Jesus in private indicates that she was in the inner circle and knew provisions were running low. She might also have felt honor bound to support the wedding couple – perhaps because they were related, or at least because they were friends. We don’t know why they were running low on wine. They were not running low on food. Perhaps there were more guests than expected. Perhaps the guests just drank more than expected. It does appear that the family was well prepared. The scripture passage indicates that there were 6 stone water jars empty after the rites of ritual purification. The ritual washing was a part of the first day of a wedding to allow festivities to begin. Six jars is an enormous number of jars – as each jar contained 20-30 gallons of water. Normally a family would own only one of these ritual stoneware jars, or a couple of families might even share a jar. So the fact that they had borrowed at least 5 more jars indicates they were well prepared for unexpected guests. And yet, somehow, they were running out of wine.

Mary’s intervention in the situation shows her compassion, as she asks Jesus to save a friend from humiliation. In her request, there is no doubt that Mary knows Jesus can do something. Maybe she doesn’t know what he will do. But she knows Jesus can save this situation. She knows he can help. And despite his initial response to her – “My hour has not yet come” – Mary’s instructions to the servants – “Do whatever he tells you to do” - shows not only that Mary has the authority to tell the household servants what to do, but that she knows Jesus will do something. Maybe she doesn’t know what yet, but she knows Jesus will respond. Jesus will help as she asks. There’s a little bit of humor in the exchange – which we sometimes miss because of translations. Mary says, “Jesus, they are running out of wine.” “What do you want me to do about it?” You can almost hear Mary laughing as she walks away. “Sure, sure, Jesus, it’s not time.” But Mary knows Jesus will help out because she asked him to. All of the exchanges between Mary and Jesus in the gospel of John are very affectionate. The address, “Woman” in verse 4 sounds harsh to our ears, but it’s really very tender and connected in the original language and culture. And of course, Jesus does do what Mary expects. He saves the wedding party, without drawing any attention to himself. He provides extravagantly and abundantly for the guests – offering the finest wine imaginable and an abundance of wine – remember 20-30 gallons for each jar. 120-180 gallons of wine. This is not only a literal gift – it is a symbolic foretaste of all that Jesus Christ will offer to the world - the best provision imaginable, wine overflowing, all that you could ever need, a banquet feast welcoming all who will come, open to everyone. More than enough to go around. This is the joyful feast of the people of God – a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God.

This miracle – like all of Jesus’ miracles recorded in the Bible – this miracle is more than just the literal action – more than just the unexplainable transformation of water into wine. All of Jesus’ miracles reveal God’s glory. All of Jesus’ miracles are meant to point toward God and to show us a little bit more about who God is. That is why this scripture passage is the third story of Epiphany. Miracles reveal God – reveal God’s mystery, God’s power, God’s sovereignty over Creation, God’s provision of everything we need. Miracles point to a deeper meaning and purpose in life. They remind us that God transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

The real miracle is not the unexplainable. The real miracle is the presence of God, the presence of the unexplainable, ungraspable, uncontainable, unfathomable, unknowable Lord of the Universe in our ordinary days and ordinary ways. The real miracle is that God cares about us. God even cares about wine at a wedding, about honor and responsibility, about family and friends and happiness and daily life. The real miracle is that God cares about us, that God in Jesus Christ touches our lives, and by that touch transforms our world. The transformation is the miracle. God can take whatever we offer – plain ordinary water – and God can transform our ordinary gifts into whatever is needed, whatever is best, whatever is blessed.

We don’t need unexplainable extraordinary interventions in our lives. We don’t need miracles. We need to recognize God with us, even in the ordinary miracles of everyday life. And they are all around us. The grace of forgiveness. The sympathy of a friend. The healing of an injury. The beauty of each day. The marvel of human ability. The blessing of work to do. The gift of something to share. The joy of someone to share it with. There are so many miracles every single day, and we sometimes miss them, because we are looking for the phenomenal, the unexpected.

So yes, the miracle at the wedding of Cana is fantastic – turning water into wine. But the true lesson of the miracle is that Jesus will always be here for us – in any time of crisis or need, God will provide. God will always give us what we need – but maybe not in the way we expect. The real lesson is that God can transform anything, any situation into bounty and blessing overflowing. God can also transform anyone – if we allow Christ to work in our lives for the good. And if we allow that transformation. God is able to bless us. God is able to open up possibilities by grace.

The miracle of the wedding at Cana – Jesus first miracle – reminds us that our human relationships, our community connections, and our loving responsibility for one another – are absolutely central to God’s work in the world through Jesus Christ. Jesus came as a human in order to transform humanity. Jesus taught us to care for one another in even the smallest ways – to love one another and to build community. Let us follow Jesus in the way of love. Follow Jesus and receive God’s miracle of grace overflowing. Amen.

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.