

Imagine that you are a candidate for office, or an entrepreneur launching a new brand, or a musician releasing your first major recording. In every case, you would choose your first public presentation carefully. Each detail would be controlled so that every single thing you say and do would convey the message of what you are about. But look at this first act of Jesus: nobody's dying, nobody's possessed by demons, and nobody's starving. Why would Jesus decide that a quintessential signifier of all he is about would be to keep a party going? Why would his first sign be turning water into wine? What did this act say about Jesus and what he came into the world to do?

Let's look at what Jesus brought to the situation (and to us). In verse 9 we are introduced to the steward, that master of ceremonies, the guy in charge of the festivities who encouraged people to celebrate and made sure the catering was impeccable. It was the steward's job to make the party great. When Jesus turns water into wine and saves the day, he is saying "I am the true master of the banquet. I am Lord of the Feast."

According to Isaiah, at the end of days *the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines* (25:6). At Cana, Jesus lets us know that he will preside over a joyful feast, an eternal banquet that is coming at the end of history. Jesus says, "As Lord of that Feast, I come to bring joy. That's the reason my calling card, my first miracle, is to set everyone dancing and laughing."

Now consider the water jars: they tell us why Jesus came. The Jewish tradition has a great number of rites and rituals designed to remind us that God is holy and perfect, and that we are human and flawed. Ceremonial washing reminded the Jews that to reconnect with God one had to confess their sins, to ask God's pardon, and to be cleansed.

The failure of the wine at the wedding feast was more than a mere embarrassment. The young couple faced public shame for letting down the family honor. Jesus rescued them from all of that; and he did it by employing the jars normally used for ceremonial washing. By this Jesus says he came into the world to accomplish *in reality* what the ceremonial jars and sacrificial laws of the Old Testament pointed to *in theory*.

As human beings we are inherently flawed, we make mistakes, we hurt each other. And when we do, we know deep down that something is really wrong with us. Sometimes we can make things right, by seeking forgiveness from the person we've wronged. But it's much harder when the sin is against God, because deep down inside, we know that we are not worthy of God's forgiveness. There is nothing we can say or do to put things right with God. Which is why Jesus came: to do what we could not do, to set us right with God. Jesus came to cleanse us of our sins, to purify us from what is spiritually wrong with us.

So, Jesus came to bring us joy by cleansing us of our sins, but just how does Jesus bring that healing, that cleansing, and that forgiveness? Here we get at the heart of the narrative. When Mary tells Jesus that the wine has run out, he responds with a rather snippy, "Woman, why do you involve me?" That's a pretty rude way to speak to your mother. It's an unusually insensitive way for Jesus to address anyone. Something is weighing heavily on him. And then he let us know what it is: "My hour has not yet come."

If you read the Gospel of John carefully, you'll discover that Jesus refers to his "hour" several other times, and every time he is speaking about his death. In essence, when Mary tells him there is no wine, Jesus responded with, "Why are you telling me this? I'm not ready to die!" Jesus connects a simple request for wine with the hour of his death, which makes no sense until we consider the symbolism. Turning water into wine is a sign of what Jesus has come to do. Wine represents festive joy, great abundance, and God's grace. Now it has run out; but Jesus came to restore to us the joy of God's salvation and the abundance of God's grace. How? Through his death and resurrection.

At Cana, Jesus is already looking far away, past his mother, past the bride and groom, and past the whole wedding scene. He's seeing the cross and the grave. He knows he can bring joy to this world and that he can cleanse humankind from its guilt and shame, but he will have to die to do it. Jesus will bring us our joy by losing all of his.

That all this happened at a wedding is extremely significant. The Old Testament frequently refers to God as the bridegroom and God's people as the bride. God does not want to be a distant king who commands his subjects; God wants a love relationship like that of a groom to his bride. Later in John's Gospel, when the disciples are criticized for not fasting, Jesus says, "Why should the friends of the bridegroom fast when the bridegroom is still with them?" Here Jesus calls himself the bridegroom! John makes much of this theme in his book of Revelation: *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, come down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband* (21:2). *Then the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'* (19:9)

In other words, at the end of time, there will be the feast to end all feasts. Not a generic banquet, but a wedding feast celebrating the intimate and permanent union of people who love each other: God and humanity bound together forever. This is how history ends. This is what Jesus came to accomplish. We, the bride, the people Jesus loves, will finally be united with him.

Edmund Clowney, 20<sup>th</sup> century pastor and theologian, preaching on this text said, "Jesus sat amidst all the joy of the wedding feast sipping the coming sorrow so that today you and I who believe in him can sit amidst all this world's sorrow sipping the coming joy." The wedding at Cana reveals the enormous relief we can have amid the world's turmoil because of the coming joy at the heavenly banquet. John's message is just as simple: even if right now you are in the midst of sorrow, sip the coming joy. Jesus turned water into wine: a sign that the best is yet to come. That's a vintage that never spoils.

This sermon inspired by Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*. (New York, Dutton, 2013), 58-80.

## The Wedding Party

Sunday, May 18, 2014

***John 2:1-11***

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jesus, his mother, and some of his disciples attended a wedding feast in Cana. Ancient cultures put far more emphasis on the family and the community than on the individual. The purpose of a marriage was not in promoting the happiness of the couple, but in binding the community together and raising up the next generation. The bigger, the stronger, and the more numerous the families of a town, the better its economy, the greater the military security, the more everyone flourished.

This meant that weddings and wedding feasts were a far bigger deal than they are today. Each wedding was a public feast for the entire town, celebrating the good fortune of the whole community, not merely the couple. Families spent months preparing for these feasts, the details carefully planned, the catering perfect.

But the wedding at Cana begins with a great disaster. Shortly into the festivities the family ran out of wine, the single most important element in an ancient feast. Essentially, the party was over. This was not a mere breach of etiquette but a social and psychological catastrophe: this couple, this family, and this community experienced a misfortune from which they might not recover. Hoping to remedy the situation, Mary goes to Jesus and asks him to help. Jesus turns ordinary water into excellent wine and the party continues, the couple in good standing, the family's honor intact, and the community's integrity upheld.

John summarizes the scene with the words, *What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him* (2:11). Now, the key to understanding this event is the word "signs." This was not simply a miracle, it was a *sign*. A sign is a symbol, or signifier, of something else. Jesus did not have to exercise his power in this situation, but he did; and this act became "the first of his signs through which [Jesus] revealed his glory" – his true identity and purpose – to others.