

The Life of the Party

John 2:1-11

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Note: Every once in a while pastoral responsibilities are such that effective sermon preparation is not always possible. This was one of those weeks, with two funerals in the church family. And so instead of writing a new sermon, I have taken one from my files and reworked it for today. But I take solace in the fact that I'm not the first one to ever use the same material more than once. Jesus himself preached the material from the sermon on the mount a second time.

Years ago when Johnny Carson was the host of The Tonight Show he interviewed an eight year old boy. The boy had been asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coal mine outside his hometown in West Virginia. As Johnny questioned the boy, it became apparent to him and the audience that the young man was a Christian. So Johnny asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday school?"

"Last week," came his reply, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine."

The audience thought that was hilarious, but Johnny tried to keep a straight face. Then he said, "And what did you learn from that story?"

The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted up his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

This morning *our* lesson is the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. John tells us that this is the first miracle Jesus performed, though he doesn't use the word, "miracle." John refers to the miracles of Jesus as "signs" because the miracles of Jesus are not simply for the sake of demonstrating the miraculous and supernatural; in John's gospel, the miracles always point to a deeper reality that reveals to us something of who Jesus is. There is something in the miracle and the encounter with Jesus that leads to a knowing or a seeing of something that wasn't previously known or seen; there is something of the divine glory and majesty that is revealed to us. The signs, then, become a basis for faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Much ink has been spilled over how to interpret the transformation of water into wine. For some, the meaning is highly symbolic, as they see in the images of water and wine representations of the sacraments of baptism and communion. Others will focus on Jesus' attendance at the wedding as an implicit indication of God's concern for and blessing upon families. Many are curious over the nature of the wine, with some who go so far as to prove that the wine was unfermented, and therefore non-alcoholic.

This morning I want to focus on something else. On several levels, the story is about qualitative changes that take place in our own hearts when Jesus comes into our lives. In this story, there are three things that happen when Jesus turns water into wine: Shame is replaced by joy; a fast is replaced by a feast; and law is replaced by grace.

When Jesus turned water into wine, he rescued the wedding couple from lifelong shame. The Jews attached a great deal of importance to the high moments of life. And so a wedding was not just a brief ceremony, but an experience shared by the entire community. The typical wedding feast could last up to seven days.

It was incumbent upon the family of the groom to assure that there was enough food and drink for the wedding celebration. And so when John tells us that the wine ran out before the wedding party had ended, his original readers would have understood the gravity of such a situation. To fail to provide for the enjoyment of the guests would bring great shame to the groom's family. It would have become a great social embarrassment for the family to run out of wine. Even more, there were provisions in the law that would allow for legal action against the family that failed to properly entertain their guests at such a community celebration.

And so when the wine ran out the stage was set for a great public humiliation to take place.

...Unless someone were to do something about it.

After a curious exchange between Jesus and his mother, Jesus changed water into wine. And in so doing, Jesus took a situation that would cause great shame, and he transformed it into a continuation of a celebration of joy.

It is telling that Jesus' first miracle was not something that we might consider more "urgent," like healing a crippled man, or feeding 5000 people, or restoring sight to a man who was born blind. It is telling that his first miracle was turning water into wine, because it demonstrates that Jesus is interested in providing for more than our basic physical needs and health; Jesus also offers us gifts that encourage the celebration and enjoyment of life itself.

People who are accustomed to seeking God's presence only at the sorrowful times of life, only when they are sad and need comfort, or people whose idea of God is that he is a cosmic killjoy, need to look carefully at this story, because it is a story that reminds us that God is interested in our joy and happiness, and that he affirms the celebration of life.

Not only did Jesus replace shame with joy, but he also transformed a fast into a feast. The wine had run out. There was nothing more that the family could offer to their guests. But when Jesus changed the water into wine, he did not simply provide a few bottles of wine so that the hosts would have just enough for the rest of the party; instead, he took six clay jars, each of which would have contained between 20 and 30 gallons of water, and turned the contents into wine.

That's 120 - 180 GALLONS of wine!

Jesus is about more than simply giving us the bare minimum of what we need. Jesus fills our cup to overflowing. God is a God who doesn't hold back! God is a God who lavishes us with blessings from head to toe, and then some. God is a God who is not confined by our narrow definitions of what we want or need; instead, God will surprise us with his abundance of goodness and mercy.

Let's be clear here. I'm not talking about some promise that God will make you wealthy. I'm not saying that God will take your empty bank account and fill it with money. That's the stuff of some of those flashy televangelists.

But I am talking about the quality of life that Jesus gives to you when he comes into your heart. Jesus came, not so that we can have life at its most basic existence. Jesus came so that we might have life, and have it abundantly! Jesus came so that we might have eternal life! Jesus is about transforming a fast into a feast, with a table spread beyond our wildest imagination.

And he invites you to the banquet table!

In a third transformation that took place in the changing of water into wine, Jesus replaced the law with grace. This is not so readily apparent in the telling of the story of the wedding, until you realize that the jars of water were jars that were normally reserved for ceremonial hand-washing. Before entering a house to eat a meal, law-abiding Jews would run a small amount of water over their hands, not as much for personal hygiene as for symbolic ritual cleansing. And the water for such cleansing was specially prepared by the priests to conform to the cleanliness laws.

It is this water that Jesus transformed into wine. It is the water that ritually says that we are unclean before a holy and righteous God, that is transformed into the wine that says that life is a gift to be enjoyed and appreciated. In a very symbolic way, the water of Christlessness is changed into the wine of new life in Christ. Jesus takes the law that says we have to earn our way into eternal life, and he fulfills that law for us and offers us eternal life as a gift of his grace. Through Jesus, the law is transformed into grace.

There is one other detail in this story that I would like to point out to you today. It is a detail that gets lost in the seemingly curt interchange between Jesus and his mother. The truth is, the whole act of turning water into wine began when Jesus' mother brought it to his attention. It was only after his mother came up to him and told him that the wine had run out that Jesus begins to act.

Do you see what has happened here? Jesus' mother has interceded in behalf of the groom's family.

It is a picture of prayer!

When I think of prayer, and in particular intercessory prayer, I think of taking the need of a friend, loved one, or simply someone whose situation has touched my heart, and lifting that need up to Jesus. In prayer I am asking Jesus to do for someone something that I cannot do. I'm asking Jesus to be the one who brings the cure. I'm asking Jesus to be the one who has the answers to life's problems.

One definition of intercessory prayer says that "intercession is to stand between two parties and plead the case of one to another. In this case it is to stand between God and another and plead to God on the other's behalf."¹

Isn't that what Mary did for the groom's family? When the wine ran out, what did Mary do? She turned to Jesus, and put the situation in his hands.

She prayed for the family.

And Jesus heard her prayers. And he transformed the shame into joy, the fast into feast, and the law into grace.

I would suggest that Mary's actions become a model for us to follow in our own lives. When we see a need, the first reaction ought to be to take that need to Jesus. Like Mary, we ought to worry about the plight of others, and we ought to seek the blessings of Jesus on their behalf. We need to recognize when the wine has run out in someone's life—maybe it's the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or chronic depression, or a tragic accident, or a natural disaster, or simply boredom with life. Whatever it may be, the point is that we should turn to Jesus on behalf of those whose wine has run out in their life. We should want for them the joyful, abundant, grace-filled life that Jesus offers to them.

When the wine runs out, whether it be in your own life or in the life of someone else, what will you do?

¹ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 52.