

The Wedding at Cana – John 2: 1-11

The story of the wedding at Cana is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. It has been the basis of countless sermons, but also numerous misinterpretations over the years. In fact, there are so many good misinterpretations of this text, its tough to know which misinterpretation is the best.

One sermon heard in a church said...”In Cana, everybody was having a good time at the wedding banquet. There was a lot of music, some dancing. It was a hot day. People got thirsty. They ran out of wine. Everybody began to get sad. But Jesus didn’t want that to happen – he wanted a celebration. So, Presto, Jesus turned water into wine, and the party continued. After all, Jesus loves a good party!”

Now I’m sure that’s something that most of us would like to believe. It is nice to think that the Lord intends to bless our human celebrations – especially a wedding. But as pleasant as that hope is, it has little to do with our text for today. There’s no hint at Cana that Jesus is that much of a party animal. If anything, he sometimes comes across as a rather stern individual who seems a bit annoyed at being called away from his table.

Or consider another interpretation of the story, this one from a bible study group. The group was talking about this wedding in Cana, and someone said, “I think it’s a wonderful tale. Jesus overcame his initial hesitation to do the right thing. Think of it – the bride and groom must have been terribly embarrassed. The party had gotten out of hand, there weren’t enough hors d’oeuvres, the roast beef was running low, and now, worst of, the caterers ran out of wine. Everyone knows you can run out of food, but you never run out of booze. It must have been awful. So Jesus stepped in, made some more wine and escaped what would have been a catering disaster.”

That too, is an interesting view of the wedding at Cana. However, with all due respect to budding Martha Stewarts everywhere, the Jesus portrayed in this text is not the least bit concerned about saving people from social miscues. In fact, he

seems totally unconcerned about etiquette. Jesus took six stone jars normally used for Jewish purification rituals, and made them into carafes of instant Chardonnay and Merlot. Is Jesus really concerned with social graces? I don't think so.

Once a priest gave this spin to this story. The priest was good friends with the groom, so he was giving the meditation. He said, You're about to begin a new life together. Sometimes this life will fill you with joy and happiness. At other times, it may feel like you've run out of wine. When those dry occasions inevitably occur, remember this wedding at Cana. Turn to Jesus and ask him to fill you up with new wine. He will always come to your assistance whenever you ask."

Of all the misinterpretations of this scripture that I've heard, that one is the most comforting. Although theologically its OK, we can't really pull that meaning out of this text. Jesus is at a party. The party runs out of wine. But nobody from the wedding party bothers to tell Jesus. No one asks for his help. It's Jesus' mother who approaches him, and the truth is, he's sounds kind of rude to her. Jesus essentially brushes his mother off.

"They are out of wine," she says. And Jesus answers, "Mom, don't tell me what to do."

I can just imagine the look Mary must have given her son that withering, 'you'd better behave' look that only a mother can give. But Jesus stands his ground. "It's not time for this yet." That doesn't really sound like the kind of warm and supportive relationship we might expect. Jesus brushes off his mother's request, and she doesn't press the issue. But she knows her son, so she whispers a word to one of the waiters – "Do whatever he tells you."

It's difficult to handle this story without letting it slip out of our hands completely. There is no simple application for our lives here. So what's going on? Is this a story about a wedding? It takes place at a wedding, but it isn't really about weddings, no. This is a story about an uncommon wedding guest, Jesus Christ. And we have already heard three clues to understanding this story.

The first is this: Jesus uses a village feast, not as an opportunity to make people happy, but as an opportunity to reveal God. This is Jesus' first public miracle. Curiously, some people missed it altogether. Jesus stood before them with

the power to turn water into wine. Those who really saw what happened could only comment on the quality of the wine.

The caterer was one of them. He no doubt knew the old party trick of serving the good stuff first – while the guests can still taste it. Later – when lots of people have had too much and can't tell the difference anymore – bring out the cheap stuff and save a little money. That's why the caterer was so surprised when the good stuff was rolled out late in the festivities. But he missed the point. Jesus revealed the glory of God, not in high and lofty places, but in the middle of a wedding. He revealed the presence of God, not in the reverent hush of a wedding performed in a sanctuary, but in the neighborhood bash immediately following. God drew near – amid the loud music, the droning of distant relatives, and a three-tiered cake with plastic figures on top. It happened in such an ordinary place. The glory of God revealed in a very human celebration.

That is the central theme of the Gospel of John. Where do we find the fullness of God? Not in the rituals or the traditions of organized religion, but in a specific human person – Jesus of Nazareth. The eternal word made flesh. Knowing this does more than make people happy. It satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart.

That brings us to a second clue to the story's meaning. If the human Jesus is to reveal the everlasting God, then some established customs will be broken. At Cana, Jesus used six large stone jars as carafes for his new wine. Those jars were normally filled with water for purification ceremonies, the ritual cleansing of dirty hands – an important thing at the time in Jewish life. Jesus claimed the authority to break the rules, and put those jars to another use. For those who knew what he was doing, it was disturbing, to say the least.

For example, let's say that a church member throws a party down in the Social Hall. They bring a large crystal punch bowl, but it slips off the counter and breaks. "No problem," think the member, "I know what we can use," and off they go into the sanctuary where they pick up the baptismal font and carry it downstairs. The caterers fill it with cranberry juice and ginger ale, and the party goes on. The baptismal font becomes a punch bowl. Disturbing, isn't it. That's something like what Jesus did here at Cana.

It goes to show that there's no telling what rules Jesus will break in order to disclose the presence and power of God. All we can be sure of is that God's glory will not be reduced to traditions and rituals. According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus Christ is not interested in maintaining religious customs and established patterns. On the contrary, Jesus is concerned with bringing us into the presence of the eternal God.

For John, what happened in Cana can happen anywhere, at any time. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can see minor miracles everyday. Significant transformations happen in life everyday.

All of this points us to the third clue, the third insight into this story – when the new life comes, when the new wine is poured, it is the gift of Jesus Christ. He alone chooses to give the new wine. No one can force him to give it, not even his own mother. No one can tell him what to do. And when Jesus chooses to act, he does so entirely from his own initiative. Just recall a couple of other stories John tells...

One day, says John, the brothers of Jesus say, "Why don't you go up to Jerusalem? It's time for a big festival, everybody will be there, and everyone will see what wonderful things you can do." And Jesus replies, "No, it's not my time yet."

Or there was the time some messengers came to Jesus. "Your friend Lazarus is sick, he's near death, please come." John tells us that Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and yet, he chooses to stay where he is two extra days instead of going to see his sick friend. An odd choice – but Jesus knows what he is doing. He finally goes to see his friend after he has died and uses the opportunity to raise Lazarus from the dead – revealing God's glory.

In the Gospel of John, no one tells Jesus what to do. He appears to make some odd choices, but Jesus has a sense of timing all his own. He is never surprised. He is never caught off guard. By contrast, Jesus always acts intentionally

and deliberately, he always knows what he is doing – for he is the Lord. He comes to reveal God’s glory, in all the circumstances of life.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks and acts not in response to any claims of kinship, friendship or even need – but at his own initiative as God’s will is revealed to him. This may seem to be without compassion, but something more than compassion is involved. In the Cana story, as well as those involving his brothers and his friends, Jesus meets the need, but he does more. Compassion alone might provide wine, but sovereign grace does more: it reveals God in what is done.

Here in His first miracle, Jesus turned water into wine. He would do many more before the greatest miracle we see in His glory as God. On the third day after his crucifixion – Jesus rose from the dead. If we live every day as if it was the third day, then there’s no telling what the risen Christ might do among us, as he comes to show us the wild, unpredictable grace of God. This is what we can trust in and what we depend on, not what we want or expect him to do, but what He chooses to do that is best in a situation and best for us. That is the core of our coming to know Him, who He is and how He chooses to bring us closer, both in the miracles of Holy Scripture and the ones in our lives every day. AMEN