

On Miracles

by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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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.



Weddings are a big deal from where I sit. I get to meet with couples and facilitate conversations on everything from communication styles and values to financial and life style expectations. I get to sit with them as they talk about their dreams and hopes for the future!



I get to hear how they have arrived to making one of the biggest, most important decisions of their lives and they're about to promise, in front of God, their families and closest friends, to do something that will require more of them than they can possibly imagine: to love and stay with this other person through thick and thin, sickness and health, soul-sapping drudgery and inevitable but unpredictable change.

So yes, a wedding is a *really big deal*. But you know what?



What many couples care most about is the **reception!** Much of the items on their “to do” list for their special day are meetings and decisions about the reception – the venue, the musicians, the menu, the seating charts, the flowers, the speeches, how the bridal party and parents will make their entrances, etc. etc. etc. The wedding ceremony is treated like a prelude to the world’s greatest party!

Well...apparently this is not a new phenomenon! Maybe it has always been like this. And if brides and grooms really wanted to push back at wedding officiants like me who insist on talking about—oh—little things like the vows, I suppose they could say that focusing on the **party** is actually quite *biblical*.

They could point to the wedding **party** in Cana! Do we hear about the spiritual and ritual aspects of the wedding? NOOO! It’s about the reception! Well, maybe this story **is** about weddings or parties, but I really think there’s more to it than that.

We are, after all, still in the season of Epiphany, when the scripture lessons are arranged in such a way as to reveal something to us about Jesus, who in turn reveals so much to us about God.



So what are we supposed to learn from this story of Jesus turning water into wine? a story that we find only in the Gospel of John where it is the first of Jesus’ “**signs?**”

And what might this “sign” tell us about who Jesus was and who God is? AND what might the story of the wedding at Cana tell us about what **our** role is in relation to the God of Jesus and his mother, Mary? And by the way - what could it tell us about the promise of God’s grace in our personal lives, in our church, and in our world?

Hmmmm, that’s a lot to ask of 11 verses. But you know what – miracles happen when we do anything with open and expectant heart and trusting that God is still speaking the word of life through any bible text. And when we are willing to read the gospel not only through our own eyes and experiences but also through the eyes of different contexts and perspectives, we may be surprised.

Are you game to take that closer look?



So, when we last saw Jesus, he was standing in the muddy waters of the River Jordan...he had just been baptized. That's what we talked about last week, right?



As the story goes, while Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice came from heaven calling him the Beloved Son. It was a moment of high drama, it was a moment that screams – PAY ATTENTION – THIS IS IMPORTANT! Something really BIG is about to happen! Or not.

In the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, Jesus immediately heads into the wilderness for a long time of fasting, prayer and testing. And after that...he begins his public ministry. But in John's gospel, Jesus begins calling his disciples right away - the day after he's been baptized. They are already calling him rabbi and Messiah and Lamb of God.

John the gospel writer seems to be in a hurry to have Jesus go into the world and do what he's supposed to do. Remember? JOHN'S Jesus is the Word who became flesh and lived among us. And living among us meant going to social events like weddings.

Jesus after the Jordan experience returned to his own country. And in the town of Cana there is a wedding...a wedding which symbolizes **union** and **oneness**...



- the joyful merging of two distinct individuals and families and genealogies,
- the creation of something new...something beautiful...a new family!
- It is a celebration of love...of hope...of possibilities...



Jesus' mother is there and—notice this—John says that Jesus and his disciples had also *been invited*. Notice, too, that the next sentence begins, “When the wine gave out . . .”

Now this is one of those times where it might be useful to try to read through eyes other than our own and understand a different context.

It is easy for us to understand the embarrassment and shame that running out of wine at a wedding reception could bring—what am I saying? I can imagine what shame my mother would be suffering if she ran out of rice or food at any family dinner she was hosting! That kind of shame would be suffered in the culture of Israel and Palestine in Jesus' time, too!

Then and still today in the Holy Land, hospitality and honor are everything. But we may have a harder time understanding how anyone could have let such a humiliating thing happen. The wedding planner and host must have known that the celebration would continue for seven days; the groom's father must have prepared and placed his order in time. And yet someone seems to have made a horrible mistake. Or not.

There are mistakes...and then there are circumstances.

There is such a thing as temporarily running out of something...and then there is never having enough.

There are unfortunate circumstances...and there are unjust conditions.

There is poor planning...and then there is *being* poor.

“When the wine gave out . . . ,” the story says.



Well, of course, the wine gave out. Think about it...

- These are Jews living in the backwoods of first-century Palestine;
- These are poor people made poorer by the taxes their Roman occupiers forced them to pay to Caesar;

- These are God's chosen people who, once again, have become the "disinherited";
- Disinherited – a word defined by the renown theologian Howard Thurman as
- *"oppressed people who are trying to survive,*
- *who are trying to maintain some sense of identity and dignity in a repressive political and economic system that treats them as less-than and no-good,*
- *people who are tempted by their circumstances and the prevailing cultural messages to hate not only their oppressor but also themselves,*
- *oppressed people living with their backs against the wall,"* says Thurman, *"people going hungry in a land of plenty—people at a wedding where there is no more wine."¹*

Jesus and his disciples have been invited to the wedding, most likely by the groom's father, but it is Mary, Jesus' mother, who invites him into the scarcity and potential shame of this situation—and it is the gospel writer John who invites us into this moment to learn something about Jesus.

"They have no wine," Mary tells Jesus, speaking to him less as her son and more as the Word Made Flesh.



Do something, she is telling him.

But Jesus is not ready; Jesus declines her invitation. Remember? Jesus tells his mother, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

Maybe he was thinking –

*- "there is **no** emergency here;*

- no one is lying at death's door,

- no one is going hungry.

The people simply have no wine, and so the party will end and the newlyweds and their families will be dishonored. What does that have to do with you or me?

Someone else might have given up. Someone else might have said, "You're right. It's really not important. *I'm* really not important; besides, I've gotten used to the hard times and feeling that I must not deserve God's blessings. I've 'learned to live with the empty.'² Don't mind me, Jesus; your love is meant for bigger things." But not Mary.

Mary *knows* who Jesus is and what God's love can do, so she proceeds as if Jesus will do what she has asked. She ignores Jesus' response and says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Mary has done more than simply *ask* Jesus to act; she has done more than merely *invite* him into the situation. She is living by faith, opening the door for him to make a way out of no way. And Jesus does not disappoint. It was a time for a miracle! At Jesus' command,



what had stood empty is filled to the very top;

- what was ordinary and commonplace becomes the finest wine;
- what was customary and expected has been turned on its head: the best had been saved for last, and there is more than enough for everyone.

This is not the last time that Jesus will transform a situation of scarcity into a demonstration of abundance.



Later he will feed the five thousand and then four thousand more, each time with what appears to be only a few loaves and fishes. It was a time for a miracle!

But isn't it something that John has Jesus' very first "sign" be one of life-affirming extravagance? It's as if John is saying to us, "this is what will happen when you invite Jesus into your emptiness; this is what can happen when you insert God's values into situations of injustice and need. Would we be brave enough to say, "It's a time for a miracle"?"

The story of the wedding at Cana encourages us to invite Jesus in to all the hard and empty places of our lives and our world, and then to live as if he is already there (because he **is** even if we don't think so).



The water-into-wine story reminds us that whenever scarcity is transformed into abundance, wherever someone speaks up for the impoverished and oppressed, God's love is made real and it is time for a miracle!

Jesus started his ministry with the everyday and the ordinary, and Martin Luther King Jr. ended up there. You knew I wouldn't pass up this opportunity to talk a little about one of the biggest heroes of my generation and my family, right? Especially since this is MLK weekend...and tomorrow is the holiday in his honor!



So again I say, Jesus started his ministry with everyday and the ordinary and Martin Luther King ended up there.

- *After* the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act had been signed into law...
- *After* the walls of segregation had begun to tumble,
 - o Dr. King turned his attention more squarely to matters of economic injustice and peace,
 - o to the very real everyday needs of a people who had been freed on paper but were still imprisoned by poverty and racism.

Many of his advisers encouraged him to pass the torch, to let someone *e/se* do the dangerous work of leading the Poor People's Campaign, but Dr. King would not hear of it. The whole reason he was in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was killed, was to press for a just wage for sanitation workers...an everyday and ordinary situation that needed to be addressed.



- There are many today who would have us believe that the wine has run out, that there is no money in the federal budget for unemployment insurance or health care or food stamps or running the government even!



- It's time for a miracle!
- There are some who say that Dr. King's wine has run out, that the big battles have been won,
- That we're as close as we'll ever get to achieving his dream,
- That it is time to move on...It's time for a miracle!
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- Some of us think UCC's wine has run out, that we cannot afford to do mission or support our national staff or improve our programs...It's time for a miracle!
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- Some of us here at BCCC might think that our wine has run out, that we should be content to survive, that we cannot afford to invest our funds in new programs or a new pastor AND a part time Chinese speaking pastor AND maybe a youth leader to boot and then trust that God will provide and we will thrive...It's time for a miracle!

But have we invited Jesus to the table? Have we insisted that **he** take his place in the debate? Have we presented Jesus with our emptiness and scarcity and come before him to redeem God's promise of life abundant for all? Have we, like Mary and Martin, gone to God on behalf of those who are in need, insisting that God act—while we get busy?

This is John's invitation to us:

- to let *God's concerns* BECOME OUR concerns,
- and to pray and live in such a way that OUR concerns become GOD'S concerns.
- To boldly declare to one another, as Mary once did, "Do as Jesus says" and expect God to show up – for it is a time for miracles!

In the name of Jesus, and in memory of his servant Martin Luther King, may it be so. Amen.