

Cornerstone
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The Wedding Feast at Cana
John 2:1-11

When pastors get together one subject that often comes up – supplying humor and entertainment to the conversation – is weddings. Any pastor with more than a handful of weddings under his or her belt has stories. Weddings are stressful – for everyone -- including pastors.

Vicki and I were at one wedding where the pastor forgot to have the guests sit down. Stage lights sometimes make it hard to see the audience and it wasn't until twenty minutes later – the wedding was more than half over – when he noticed everyone still standing.

My worst wedding faux pas happened nineteen years ago, when Stu Weber, who had already done the premarital counseling and was planning to preside over the ceremony, got called out of town. He asked me to step in. I didn't meet the couple until the rehearsal but we did the usual walk and everything was fine.

A month earlier I had done another wedding for a different family group so I figured I could just tweak that ceremony for this new couple. On my computer I did a search and replace – changing the names and a few other things.

The next evening I'm standing next to the groom. The bride and father of the bride have walked down the aisle, and I began. "We are gathered here today to join..." and I did a double take on my notes. The paper said, "Mark." I didn't think the guy standing to my left was named Mark but I wasn't really sure so I just went for it. "We are gathered here today to join Mark" – and in unison the front row – the groom's side -- corrected me.

"No, it's Mike."

Mike, Mark, that's pretty close. I bluffed my way through. "Sorry, Mike. We're gathered here today to join Mike and..." Uh-oh. My paper said Jane. I knew that wasn't the bride's name but in the stress of the moment I no clue what her name was. (She should have had a name tag.) I could have said, "We're joining Mike and this beautiful bride" or something like that, but my brain was frozen. I couldn't think of any other name so I said, "We're here to join Mike and Jane..." and in unison the bride's side went, "No, it's Maryann."

Not even close. Apparently, I had the cursor too far down the page when I did the search and replace. By the time I got to the vows my notes said Mike and Maryann.

From the time children are born we teach them that weddings are big events. We read them stories about fairy tale brides. Royal weddings get headline news coverage. The result is that by the time they come to their own wedding day, they can file away a lot of ideas for their own wedding.

Here in the northwest, weddings tend to be simpler and quicker than many other places. In many cultures weddings stretch over several days. In Rosemary Khamati's Kenyan tribe the bride's family is expected to feed and entertain the groom's extended family for a week at engagement time. Weddings are similarly complex.

In first century Hebrew culture a wedding was considered the single most significant event in a person's life. This was especially true in poor families, who went all out. The bride and groom were king and queen for the day. Guests enjoyed a sumptuous feast of the best food and wine. To run out of food would embarrass the groom's whole extended family and to run out of wine was unforgivable. You could even get sued. Following the feast a torchlight parade accompanied the newly married couple to their home. The parade would take a circuitous route so all the towns people could see the couple and wish them well.

In the story we're about to read, wedding guests were enjoying the meal when Jesus' mother, Mary, came to Jesus with an urgent message: "They have no more wine." It was right up there with a groom fainting, a bride tripping, or the wedding cake collapsing.

Stand if you are able and let's read the story together. Here is John 2:1-11.

John 2:1 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." 4 "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

6 Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. 8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, 9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine.

He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10 and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." 11 What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples put their faith in him.

May God add his blessing to the reading of his Word.

When it comes to understanding this first miracle of Jesus, which appears only in John, by the way, we, in America have a disadvantage. Our disadvantage is it's easy to get stuck on the subject of alcohol. Contrary to what one of my Multnomah professors insisted, John did not include this story to teach abstinence from alcohol.

In fact the hotly debated question by American evangelicals from Prohibition onward would never even have occurred to most Christians over the past 2000 years. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli, Wycliffe, and the apostle Paul would all have scratched their heads if they heard someone ask if the wine in this parable was alcoholic. “What do you mean, was it alcoholic? Does a cow have a tail?”

In a Jewish wedding the guests rarely got drunk. It was difficult to get drunk on the wine they served because it was always diluted – one part wine to two parts water – sometimes up to ten parts water. Straight wine with a higher alcohol content was called “strong drink” in Bible times.

But so we can get past the alcohol issue to what this story is really about, let’s look briefly at what the Bible says about alcohol.

The rabbis of Jesus’ day had a saying, “Without wine there is no joy” and throughout the Bible joy and wine are often linked.

Eccl. 9:7 So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this!

Psalm 104 says God provides wine to make people glad.

You cause grass to grow for the livestock and plants for people to use. You allow them to produce...wine to make them glad. (Ps. 104:14-15)

“Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink-- even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk-- it's all free!” Isa. 55:1 (NLT)

After the Babylonian captivity, some of the workers rebuilding the temple were paid with wine.

Ezr. 3:7 Then the people hired masons and carpenters and bought cedar logs from the people of Tyre and Sidon, paying them with food, wine, and olive oil.

The prophet Joel talks about a future Day of the Lord when the mountains would drip with excellent wine.

Joel 3:18 In that day the mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills will flow with milk.

And of course, there’s Paul, who advised Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:23,

“Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” (1 Tim 5:23)

So, here's what I believe in four statements – and if you disagree I hope we can still be friends.

1. I believe Jesus drank wine and scripture does not forbid the moderate consumption of alcohol.

Jesus was not a Nazarite – never took the Nazarite vow that forbid consumption of alcohol. He participated in festivities like everyone else. At the last supper he said, he would not drink Passover wine again until he drinks it in the kingdom of God.

2. There are wise and legitimate reasons to avoid alcohol completely. I respect anyone who has decided they will never consume alcohol, even in moderation. Which leads to the next statement –

3. Both moderate use of alcohol and abstinence are biblically defensible. Notice I keep saying “moderate.” The Bible very clearly condemns drunkenness. No question about that. All of us know people whose lives have been ruined by alcohol. If you never drink, you cannot become an alcoholic.

4. The principle "love limits liberty" must be applied to alcohol use. Alcohol can certainly be a "stumbling block" issue (Romans 14:1-5). One person's license or freedom to drink can cause someone with an alcohol weakness to fail. That is not okay.

As Englishman John Stott said,

"The accumulated human misery in every corner of the earth which results directly or indirectly from the immoderate use of alcohol puts the burden of proof on those who would advocate anything other than abstinence as the Christian stance in the late twentieth century."

No matter how free you are in Christ you must also exercise responsibility and there is no room for a "holier than thou" attitude on either side of this issue.

Now let's leave the alcohol question and move on to what John wanted to communicate. In verse 11 he calls the wedding miracle a “miraculous sign” and then he gives two reasons for the sign. Whenever John uses the word “sign” in his gospel he’s saying there’s more to this story than meets the eye. Yes, Jesus rescued the groom’s family from embarrassment. He prevented a wedding disaster but that’s not all John wants readers to understand.

The sign accomplished three things, the first being *it revealed Jesus’ glory*. John started his gospel calling Jesus the eternal Word who was a full participant in creation. This miracle is strong evidence that Jesus was, in fact, God, who could, at any time, set aside laws of nature. Jesus’ miracles were never simply naked displays of power designed to impress people. Satan wanted Jesus to do a trick of some kind at Jesus’ temptation. Jesus refused. He also refused Herod’s invitation to do a miracle when Jesus was on trial.

The second result of this sign was Jesus’ disciples (there were only 6 at this time) - the disciples saw and believed.

I think there’s also a third reason implied in this miracle and that’s that John wanted readers to know that Jesus had the power to transform lives. It’s just a hint – just the start. When John

quotes Mary, "They have no more wine," he wants readers to feel empty and helpless. Life without Christ is like a wedding without wine. They have no wine. You have no joy. No matter what you have going for you, money, status, abilities, popularity – there will come a time when the wine runs out and if you don't have Christ, you're in a vulnerable spot.

Scholars speculate that Mary, the mother of Jesus, may have been related to the groom because she and Jesus – and his 6 disciples – had apparently all been invited. (Joseph was probably dead by this time.) That's quite a group – and Mary seems to have a caterers concern when the wine ran out. When she came to Jesus you hear desperation in her voice.

You may not have had a wedding go bad just recently, but you may be in a spot where something else has gone upside down. At one time life was good, you were healthy, active, you had plenty of money, lots of friends and then something happened to change all that. Instead of joy, you're feeling discouragement – maybe even depression.

- It can hit in the teenage years when there are so many adjustments to make and so much pressure. Everybody else seems to be having fun but you're miserable.
- Sometimes joy runs out in college – often a combination of lack of sleep, and frustration over failed relationships.
- Sometimes joy runs out shortly after a baby's birth. Sounds strange – and you can feel terribly guilty because everybody else is saying "isn't this great" and you don't feel great at all.
- Depression can hit at "midlife," or in the later years when you realize you cannot do what you dreamed of doing at this point in your life. You can start believing you are no longer useful or valuable.

Jesus understands that kind of emptiness. Isaiah called the Messiah a "man of sorrows, familiar with suffering."

At the wedding feast Jesus' mother was near panic when she finds Jesus. Volumes have been written about Jesus' response to his mother in verse 4.

John 2:4 "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

To us it sounds rude and stand-offish. It may not have been as bad as it comes across in some translations. The King James says, "Woman, what have I to do with Thee?" Yikes!

First of all, Jesus was not being disrespectful by addressing his mother as "Woman." He addressed her the same way when he was on the cross and clearly was very much concerned for her welfare. Still, Jesus' answer here does imply a shade of disassociation.

He was a 30 year old man now. He was ready to launch his public ministry and Jesus needed to assert his independence. In particular, his mother needed to know that from here on he would be free from any human advice – even hers. She could no longer see him as other moms viewed

their sons.

A son reaching adulthood is a difficult transition for a lot of mom's particularly, as was probably the case with Jesus, when the father is no longer in the picture. It's generally agreed that by this time Joseph had passed away and Mary was a single mom. Jesus is giving notice that from this point on he would depend on and look to his heavenly Father, not his earthly mother, for strength and guidance. So he says in effect, "Mom, I'm a man now. I'm a rabbi now," but he respects her by fixing the problem.

By the way, Mary's successful intervention does not provide sufficient reason to pray through her to get to her Son, Jesus. If this scenario qualified Mary as our mediatrix, why not pray through others who requested and got something from Jesus?

Matthew tells about a synagogue leader who asked Jesus to raise his daughter from the dead! Jesus did it. Talk about a big concession. So why not pray through the synagogue leader?

Jesus tells the servants to fill six stone barrels with water and the water miraculously became wine. The miracle not only provided plenty of good wine for the feast, but it was also quite a wedding gift. Verse 6 says the servants filled six water pots, each holding 20-30 gallons. So the newlyweds likely had a lot of leftover wine to put on Craigslist when this was all over.

There have been a couple feeble attempts to explain away the miracle. Some have tried to say what really happened was Jesus told the servants to dilute the remaining wine with water. (Uh, what remaining wine? They were out!)

Others have tried to say this was not an actual event but a parable Jesus told. So why would John change it from a parable to an event – when he says his purpose in writing was to convince readers that Jesus was God. So what if John could tell stories?

Instead, John is saying, “When you do what Jesus says, life works better.” You can almost see a twinkle in John's eye as he records what the banquet host commented, "why this new wine is even better than the wine that ran out."

Jesus is always about making things new. No matter where you are now, no matter what problems you are facing, when you let Jesus control your life, better days are ahead! Even at death, there are much better days ahead.

It's very sad to me when someone loses that perspective. I have friends who look back 30 or 40 years to "the good times." Psalm 92 says,

Psalm 92:12-14 But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon. For they are transplanted to the LORD's own house. They flourish in the courts of our God. Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green.

If you're in the middle of tough times, pray this psalm in faith. "Lord, let me flourish and grow stronger with time. Let me be productive for you no matter what I'm going through.

I want to conclude with two more lessons I think we can glean from the wedding feast at Cana:

1. First, nothing that concerns you is too small to take to Jesus.

Think about it...why would the Son of God, the Creator of the universe care whether a groom was embarrassed at his wedding? How many grooms have been embarrassed at their weddings? In the scope of life – wedding glitches are not that big of a deal, yet when Jesus was told of the problem at this wedding, he cared and he took action.

It would be overstating it to make a rule that if you every run out of anything at a wedding, Jesus will always provide but we *can* say with confidence that no issue that concerns you is inconsequential to Jesus. There is no cutoff point below which the Lord says, "*Oh come on! I don't care about that kind of thing. I don't have time for that.*" If it matters to you, talk to the Lord about it and let him decide whether to intervene.

Examples –

- My dog Tostie is 12 years old now and I don't even know how many times I prayed to find my dog when she ran away. A few months ago she took off and I found the little sinner sitting patiently in front of Polly's door.
- When our kids were little Vicki and I prayed over a lot of owies, some small, some big. We do the same now for our grandchildren.
- I don't know if Jesus would ever tilt a soccer game in favor of your child. Maybe. Maybe not. If it concerns you, let Jesus decide.
- Does he care about politics? Well, he said to pray for our rulers. Sure seems like our leaders and our country could use prayer right now.

That reminds me – Nov 2-3 we are committing ourselves to 24 hours of prayer. The link is in the email update I sent out a few days ago. You can sign up for half hour slots – and this week we'll provide more things to pray about than you could possibly cover in 30 minutes.

Sometimes people paint Jesus aloof. He's no. You care about everyday life. So does Jesus. If in doubt, talk to the Lord about it, and let him decide.

The second application is this:

2. Anchor your faith in the person of Christ, not the miracles he might perform.

Jesus miraculously provided wine at this wedding feast, not because his mother asked him to, not because he was friends with the groom, but because in his plan this was an opportunity to bring glory to himself. Keep this in mind when you pray. It's not just about your need but highlighting the power and love and glory of Jesus. So when he acts on your behalf be sure to give credit to whom credit is due.

And don't forget that many of the Lord's most impressive miracles happen inside people. God does a miracle every time he takes a person who falls short of God's perfect standard and changes them into a child of God.

Has that miracle taken place in you? You may know how to act like a Christian, how to pray like a Christian, you may know the vocabulary of Christians, but you have never said, "Lord, come in and take over my life. Take away my sinful nature and give me a nature that wants to do right."

Do that you and you'll experience a miracle far greater than changing the chemical characteristics of a few stone pots of water. And you can do it right now.