

“What Would a Wedding Be Without a Crisis?”

John 2:1-11

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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Johnny Carson was the host of the Tonight Show from 1962-1992. He mastered the art of putting people at ease while casually talking to them in front of a television camera, making it possible for millions of people to listen and watch.

One of his guests was an eight year old boy from West Virginia who rescued two playmates from a mine shaft. When Johnny discovered his guest attended church regularly, he asked him what he was studying in Sunday school.

“Last week,” he replied, “our lesson was about Jesus going to a wedding and turning water into wine.”

“What did you learn from that story?” Carson asked.

The boy squirmed in his chair, and after a while it became apparent he had not thought about the meaning of this story. Finally, he lifted his head and looked Johnny squarely in the eye. He was now ready to answer Johnny’s question.

“Here is what I learned,” he said to Carson, “If you are going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!” Of course, the crowd roared with laughter.

I don’t know who got married in the wedding described in the second chapter of the fourth gospel, but Jesus and the disciples were invited. Without a doubt, the bride and groom, along with their families, were glad they showed up. Listen as I tell you why.

On the third day of Jesus’ public ministry, he and the disciples attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee. In all likelihood, the bride or groom was one of Jesus’ relatives based upon the

leadership role his mother played in the story. Family members were expected to help fund the wedding or bring food and drink to the reception. Mary's part in this drama indicates this was the wedding of a family member.

Sometime after Jesus arrived, a serious problem arose. They ran out of wine. To understand how devastating this was, you need to know how important weddings and hospitality were in that culture.

A wedding was the most festive occasion in a family's life. The entire community participated in the festivities, and people from surrounding communities made a special effort to attend.

Even days after the ceremony, people came to the bride and groom's home to bring gifts and to celebrate with the young couple. Those who traveled long distances came to offer their home for lodging whenever the bride and groom passed through their area. In a time when inns were scarce and money was tight, the intent was for someone in every nearby town to know the wedding couple so a home would be open to them whenever they needed it.

In light of this, the last thing the bride and groom wanted to experience when well-wishers came bearing gifts was a shortage of food and drink to offer in return. It was their sacred duty to provide the same kind of hospitality they had and would receive from others.

No wonder Jesus' mother, Mary, informed him of this crisis as soon as he and the disciples arrived. It was the highest priority on her 'do something about this' list.

At first, Jesus did not sign on to help. "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come," he abruptly replied. (John 2:4)

Mary appeared to brush Jesus' brusqueness aside and said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

I'm sure you may be puzzled by this exchange between Jesus and Mary. Jesus' words appear to be harsh and disrespectful.

In reality, it is the author's way of telling his readers more was on Jesus' mind than the needs of this wedding couple, as crucial as they were. He was wrestling with how and when to begin his public ministry and could not be pushed into solving a problem without thinking of the ramifications.

He had not planned on doing anything at the wedding that would draw attention to him. Providing wine for this embarrassed and humiliated couple was a request he certainly had not anticipated, and he needed time to think about whether he would come to their aid, and if so, how he would do it?

Jesus was also putting some distance between him and his mother. No longer was he a submissive child, at least as he had been, but an adult who was heading in a new direction that would require being in complete control of his decisions. Jesus knew things Mary did not, and quite frankly, he did not have time to explain them to her.

It is never easy when the role between parents and their children begins changing, is it? I believe Jesus understands how awkward this can be.

At some point, Jesus made the decision to help this young couple. He instructed the servants Mary spoke to earlier to fill six nearby ceremonial water jars to the brim. After doing this, Jesus told the servants to begin taking the water to the master of the banquet.

Those of you familiar with this story know what the headmaster's reaction was—shock and awe. Somewhere in this process, this water changed to wine, and it was not only the best wine the chief steward had been given to serve at this wedding, but probably better than any wine he had served anywhere.

Since the master of the banquet did not know where this wine came from, he assumed the groom had provided it. This was why he said to him, "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." (John 2:10)

The narrator concludes this portion of the gospel by telling his readers this was the first of Jesus' miraculous signs, implying more would follow. From these signs, a clearer picture of Jesus' identity, mission, purpose and uniqueness would emerge.

You know what intrigues me most about this story? It is the placement of it in the fourth gospel, immediately after Jesus was baptized and began calling his disciples. This story was used to introduce Jesus to the readers, including us.

Now, I recognize the connection between this story and the conversation Jesus previously had with Nathaniel when Jesus told him he would see greater things than what he had witnessed during their initial encounter, but for me there is another reason it was placed near the beginning of this gospel. The events that occurred at that wedding in Cana revealed things about Jesus every reader needs to know as he or she studies Jesus' life and ministry.

If this is true, and I believe it is, what does this story tell us about Jesus? For starters, it tells us **Jesus was a man of the people.**

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," we read in the prologue of this gospel. (John 1:14) Jesus' appearance at the wedding in Cana of Galilee quickly reinforced this bold declaration.

Jesus' first miracle was not performed in the Temple in Jerusalem in front of the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, it was discreetly done among common people in a sleepy, Palestinian village, many miles from the center of religious activity. It was in this rural environment Jesus was at home, engaged and involved in the everyday affairs of his neighbors.

He knew their names, their struggles and their dreams. He knew what they worried about and what kept them up at night.

He knew how important weddings were to them and how guilty and embarrassed they would feel if they ran out of food and wine to serve their guests. As a result, he changed his mind about getting involved in this wedding crisis, and he responded to their need and Mary's implied request beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

Jesus turned 180 gallons of guilt and shame into 180 gallons of mercy and grace. Yes, that's how much water the servants probably put in those six jars. Most ceremonial jars held between 20 and 30 gallons. One jar would have been sufficient; two would have left plenty for another wedding. Jesus lavished this couple with far more than they could have imagined.

“My cup runneth over,” the Psalmist penned generations before as he pondered the goodness and faithfulness of God. This couple, and those who had a responsibility to feed the wedding guests, now felt the same way.

Why was the wedding in Cana chosen to be the lead story in this gospel? Jesus was sent by God to live among the people so he could make hope visible. His mission was to turn despair into hope and to lift the spirits of people struggling to survive.

This would not be the last time this beautiful, excited and happy couple would run out of something. In the future, they would run out of all kinds of things: food, money, energy, stamina, will power, patience, dreams, hope and time. When they did, God could be counted on to use Jesus and others to lead, guide, strengthen and sustain them.

Beyond this, though, the wedding in Cana of Galilee was chosen to be the lead story in this gospel to inspire us to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We serve God best by engaging with those around us as Jesus did, listening to their stories and responding to their needs with overwhelming generosity. We may not be able to do everything Jesus did, but we can and must be the presence of Christ among our family members and neighbors by following Jesus' example.

There is no shortage of people around all of us who have come up short and dug through empty pockets to find hope. Everybody runs out of something fairly often. In these times, we need to be one of many who reaches out to them to turn grief to joy, fear to courage, rejection to acceptance, worry to peace of mind and despair to hope.

From this story, I see more clearly two kinds of people in the world—those who turn water into wine through compassion and generosity, and those who turn wine into water through a critical and judgmental spirit. Which describes you this morning?

“What did you learn from this story?” Johnny Carson asked his new friend that night in front of millions of television viewers. Had I been that little boy, I would not have been as clever as he was.

If I were sitting on that couch now, I believe I would reply this way. “Johnny, here is what I learned from this story. Every kind deed, spontaneous or planned, that turns despair to hope is a miracle. The place it occurs is holy ground, and the person who does it is an instrument of God.”

Be that instrument this week.