



We Need More Good Wine

John 2:1-11

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Washington Street UMC

January 16, 2022

As Kyle and I were discussing worship for this Sunday at start of last week, we were looking at the possible scripture options for this 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany. One of the scriptural offerings from the Revised Common Lectionary was from 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul defines the church as the body of Christ. It's a hard text for me to pass up on, because it drives my understanding of who we are as a church – as an individual representation of the greater witness of the Church in the world.

It would take a good alternative for me to pass up preaching on Paul's articulation of how we are to function as the Church.

And then I noticed the Gospel reading for the week is John 2.

I know I still have more to learn about our community here in the City of Alexandria, and who you are as the people of Washington Street United Methodist Church, but one thing I know is that by and large, this is a community that appreciates good wine. If there were a text more invitational to this community, I haven't found it yet.

As I was reflecting on the text this week, considering the thoughts of other scholars, preachers, and students of the scripture, I saw something I hadn't seen before in this text. The synthesis of analysis brought to the forefront of this text a significance I hadn't previously considered.

I love this about the Biblical Word. It doesn't matter how many times you read it, there's always something else to "see." Perhaps it's a combination of our changed and learned experience interacting in new ways with the text, or perhaps our ability to hear and see the experience of others that invites us to a new understanding, but the Word is a living Word that continues to invite and call us to greater faithfulness and discipleship.

The text begins by offering the setting for what is to come. "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee." On third day of what? To figure out the timing of this event, we have to back up in to the first chapter of John.

As we read last week, John the Baptist had been baptizing in the wilderness east of Jerusalem. We're told that priests and Levites, members of the scholarly classes in the Temple, were sent by the Pharisees to inquire about the Baptizer's activities. They wanted to know why he was baptizing – and in whose name, or under whose authority. John told them that the Messiah was coming.

The very next day, Jesus showed up to where John was baptizing. John proclaimed, “This is the one of whom I spoke. I saw the Spirit descend upon him. This is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”

The following day, Jesus showed up again, this time with two of his disciples, and John again exclaimed, “Here is the Son of God.”

On the third day, Jesus decided to go up to Galilee, and there he called a few more disciples, Phillip and Nathanael, to follow him. In his invitation to follow, Nathanael acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel.

The timing of this is important, because it indicates we are at the very start of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus has just returned from the River Jordan, having lingered for a few days after his own baptism. It is just the third day since the dove descended from the heavens upon Jesus as he walked out of the baptismal waters. He has just entered the region of Galilee, where the majority of his public ministry will take place.

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and the disciples had been invited to the wedding.”

Weddings a glorious and joyful celebration. Admittedly, weddings are one of my favorite responsibilities as a pastor. I love being a part of weddings – to see the unbridled hope and tear-filled eyes of mothers and fathers – to witness the love-soaked vows of commitment and covenant – to share in the creation of a new combined family unit. Never mind that I often end up being the awkward dude who sits in the corner by myself during the reception because I don’t know anyone in the room, it doesn’t bother me, because I love sitting and watching the jubilee that fills the space. It is life giving.

But anyone who has planned a wedding knows that wedding planning is not always as joyful as the event itself ... especially in the world today, where the wedding industry *just in America*, generates over \$60 billion of revenue per year. Couples are forced to make difficult decisions about where to hold the event, what food and beverage to serve, and how many place-settings they can afford. To help with the invitations, the guest list is broken into 3-levels, each with a different attendance priority. *We want everyone on list A to be here. We want as many people possible from list B to be here. And, well, list C are people we’d welcome if people from A and B decline the invitation.* (A note to wedding goes, don’t ever ask which list you were on, just appreciate that you received an invitation!)

While weddings are certainly more expensive today than in the first-century middle east, they are of no greater importance. Weddings have always been a big to-do. The wedding to which Jesus was invited – not knowing which list he was on to receive his invitation – was likely the wedding of a local couple, perhaps a member of Jesus’ extended family. Scholar Richard Swanson indicates that weddings of the first century were often attended by the extended family, or clan, of those being wed. It was a large celebration, where whole clans celebrated the union of the couple because it meant the union of the families.ⁱ

One of the clans, depending on how the arranged marriage was set up, would have been responsible for providing the food and beverage for the event. As we read on, it seems the grooms family was in charge of the reception. Though perhaps not a \$60 billion venture, it would not have been inexpensive to provide for such a large gathering. But given the importance of hospitality in the first-century culture, providing a sufficient meal with ample beverage would have been of utmost importance. Should the food or beverage run out, it would have been an embarrassment for the whole of the responsible clan – it could have shamed and slandered their name should they be seen as having lacked hospitality.

We don't know how far into the night the story has progressed, but the wine has run out. Jesus' mother comes to him and says, "They have no wine." Now, to note, the text doesn't tell us that Mary is asking Jesus to do anything about it, at this point, she's just making a statement of fact. Perhaps, she's playing to role of the disgruntled aunt of the groom, who, in a gossipy whine, goes to Jesus to complain that there is no more wine. *"I can't believe they don't have enough, and I saw her father drink three glasses already."*

I'm sure you've been to a wedding where such complaints were made. I mean, who among us hasn't been to a wedding where *we* were the Mary of the story. If there's one thing I can't stand at a wedding, it's running out of hors d'oeuvres before I've had a chance to try to lamb sliders.

Jesus seems unimpressed with Mary's complaint. He responds in what seems like a terse reply, "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come."

There are so many ways to interpret Jesus' response. Is the wine running out of no concern to Jesus and Mary because they don't drink? Are Mary and Jesus unrelated to the clan responsible for providing the wine, and so Jesus chooses not to shoulder the responsibility for the clan's honor, knowing that if the wine really is out, it would be a huge embarrassment? Is it late in the night, and everyone's already drunk, and so Jesus doesn't see the need for more wine to be available?

And what does Jesus mean, "my hour has not yet come?" Is this a statement of theological significance? According to our timeline, Jesus has *just* begun his public ministry, there's a long way to go before Jerusalem and Golgotha. ... Or is Jesus making a more temporal statement. Is he focusing more on the timing of this night? Perhaps he's thinking through the timing of his first miracle? He will perform many miracles – and Mary knows that it is in his capacity. She knew before she gave birth to this child that he would do great things.

Or is it so much simpler? Perhaps Jesus is just pushing back like any young adult son who is put on display at a family event, "mooom, not now. Can't you see I'm hanging with my friends? The time has not yet come."

But Mary knows it's in Jesus' capacity. And even though Jesus has said no, Mary turns to the servers who were working the event and said, "do whatever he tells you."

What a mom move. Am I right? “I don’t care that he said he didn’t want to help, he’s going to help, and so you’re going to do whatever he tells you to do to make this right.” #ThanksMom

The scripture notes, “Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty to thirty gallons.” It’s likely these jars had been used to wash the hands of the guests as they arrived at the wedding. It was a custom and ritual for this purification to take place. If all six jars had been used for the purification process, we’re not talking a small wedding. That’s enough water to wash the hands of *a lot* of people.

But more importantly, that’s a lot of water to be turned in to ...

See, Jesus calls the servants to fill up the jars to the brim. They need to be dripping water over the top edge, he wants them so completely filled up. We’re talking 180 gallons of water now – we’ve maxed out at the high end of the 30 gallon capacity.

Once the jars are filled up – a task that wouldn’t have been easy considering the servers had to lift and carry these jars at their filled capacity – Jesus tells them, “Draw some out and take it to the chief stewards.”

“When the chief steward tasted the water *that had become wine*, and he did not know where it had come from (though the servers who had drawn the water knew), the steward called to the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then inferior wine after the guests become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Look at God. Don’t miss this, because this is no small thing. Jesus had the servers fill up the six jars of water, holding some thirty gallons each. We’re talking somewhere in the neighborhood of 180 gallons of water. Now, I’m no master sommelier, but if you consider a healthy 5-ounce pour per glass, we’re talking 4,600 glasses of wine. That’s right, over 23,000 ounces of wine in these barrels. And we’re not talking the cheap stuff. We’re talking legit wine here. Jesus has pulled from the library, opening a Rothschild Bordeaux, or perhaps a vintage Opus One.

If you’re a Shark Tank fan, we’re talking the kind of high quality Burgundy wines Kevin O’Leary drinks with the Chevaliers de Testevin.

This is good wine, and lots of it.

And as I was reading the text this past week, this is where I saw something I hadn’t seen before.

The chief steward, impressed as he was with the quality of the wine that was saved for the later part of the evening, went to the groom to note his surprise. “You have saved the good stuff until now,” the steward said.

Can you imagine the look on the groom’s face? Some 30 minutes ago, someone likely went up to the groom concerned that the wine was about to run out. The groom was bracing himself for the

impending hysteria and shame. I can imagine he saw the chief steward approaching him from the far side of the room. He was waiting for those dishonorable words, “there is no more wine.” But the news the steward brought was *good news*. Not only is there plenty of wine, but it's the good stuff. The party shall go on.

The text notes that the servers knew that Jesus was the one responsible for this miraculous moment, and that following the wedding, the disciples believed in him because of this first sign of his glory – but no one else in the story knew that this wine came into being because of Jesus. No one else knew that the wine had run out. No one else knew the servers had schlepped 180 gallons of water up from the spring. No one else knew that the groom sweat through his shirt in anxious anticipation of disgrace. No one else knew ... and yet, it's clear this was the work of God. *This was the work of God.*

As Professor Gerard Sloyan notes, “[This story] tells about the disclosure in ordinary family festive circumstances of the hidden glory of Jesus the Son.”ⁱⁱ

We spend a lot of time highlighting the difficulties of life, the challenges of everyday living, and the woes that cause great strife in our world. We are quick to bring assumption that such challenges are the work of evil. But rarely do we pause to consider the glory of good wine. We don't pause often enough to give thanks to God for the moments of good news. We don't celebrate often enough the miracles of modern medicine: how God works in science labs to create vaccinations that provide immunity and improved community health. We don't share thanks often enough to God for the abundance of resources that have aided in putting food on the tables of those who, by force of choice, have lost their jobs in the past couple of years. We don't commend with enough regularity the sustaining Spirit for helping the grocery store and restaurant workers have the strength to keep showing up in the face of vapid and entitled customers who think they are always right. We don't recognize the work of God in our midst when we land a new contract, when we witness the beauty of God's created nature while travelling abroad, or when we uncork a bottle of good wine.

Not all heroes wear capes, and not all miracles involve the physical Lord in an indisputable act of divine participation. The sign at Cana points us to the source of all life and joy – to the one who is with us, even when we don't see him or have faith in him. The glory of God as revealed in the Epiphany is that Christ comes for all people to receive new life and abundant joy. So whether you're drinking the water or the wine, don't forget to take pause and give thanks for the love of God in Christ, who shares in the celebration of good news, bringing new life to all the world. For that news is news worthy of raising a glass. Cheers.

ⁱ Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of John*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 20210.

ⁱⁱ Gerard Sloyan. *John: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987.