

LIFE OF THE PARTY

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John 2:1-11

As a pastor, I have overseen dozens of weddings. Weddings are complex affairs with numerous moving parts. Something is guaranteed go wrong. You can bet on it. I always tell the couple that no matter what happens, in the end, you will be married. If something does go wrong, then you'll have a story to share with your children.

I remember one out-of-town wedding that had been meticulously planned by a wedding planner. This person was a professional and had all the plans and details in their planning book. However, when I arrived for the rehearsal, I was told that the wedding planner was sick and would not make the wedding. Nobody knew what to do. Other than the service itself, it was chaos.

My cousin played SEC football and is a big guy. However, on the morning of his wedding, he was in the ER with the flu getting enough shots so that his brother could prop him up long enough to get through the service. They asked me to make the service brief. I did.

And then there was the time that my wife's wedding dress burned. She had purchased her dress at a bridal shop in Nashville. They placed the dress in their storage closet which happened to be above the furrier shop next door. Animal rights activists broke in and set fire to the furs. Now, my wife's dress wasn't actually burned, but it reeked of smoke. When the young woman from the bridal shop called, she was nearly in tears. My wife asked if the dress could be replaced in time for the wedding, and they said it could. My wife told them then there was no problem. Apparently, not all the brides had been so understanding.

Our reading today is about a wedding. It comes from the second chapter of the Gospel of John. John begins his gospel with his prologue, *In the beginning was the Word...* Then, he introduces John the Baptist and tells of Jesus' own baptism in the river. Immediately after that, Jesus calls his twelve disciples.

Chapter 2 shifts gears in a surprising way. It begins with Jesus attending a wedding. The wedding is in the town of Cana not far from Jesus' home in Nazareth. Jesus' mother is there at the wedding as well, as are his disciples. To be clear, they were not wedding crashers. They had all been invited.

At some point during the festivities, the wedding runs out of wine. Not good. Jesus' mother informs her son of this by telling him, *They have no wine.*

Now, there is so much about this wedding that we don't know—so many unanswered questions. Who were the bride and groom? Were they friends or family? Why was Jesus invited? Why was Jesus' mother so concerned that the wine had run out? What does she expect her son to do about it?

In that culture, a wedding was a significant event. The wedding feast would have lasted for several days—as many as seven. Wine, as a beverage, was central to the event. It would be the life blood of the celebration. To run out of wine would have been a tragedy. If there was no wine, then people were likely to leave and head home. The party would be over.

When Mary informs her son that the wine has run dry, his question to her is, *Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?* It sounds harsh, but he has a point. After all, they are merely guests at the party. They are bystanders. They are not responsible for the supplies. We can all appreciate his question.

Imagine that you are at a large party, a ball, a benefit ball, maybe even the Phoenix Ball at Cumberland University. And at some point, they run out of food and the bar dries up. It would seem that whoever was in charge of ordering had ordered for 100 people, not 1000. With no food and no drink, what is there to do but to go home.

But then someone comes up to you and tells you they've run out and implies that you should do something. What would you say? You would tell them that it is none of your business. There is nothing you can do. What could Jesus do?

What Jesus says next is a bit more problematic. He states, *My hour has not yet come.* It is not clear what he means by this. His hour for what? When will that hour arrive? What is he waiting for? Certainly not a wedding in Cana. It does sound as if there is some larger plan to reveal Jesus to the world. Maybe that will be his hour.

A politician has been making speeches in New Hampshire and Iowa and he goes on CNN and the host asks, "Are you running for president?" and the politician deflects saying, "It's not the time to talk about that?" Why isn't it the time? If you are going to run, then say so. Why the song and dance? You are either running or you are not? Jesus is either savior or he is not. It seems that it takes some nudging from his mother to remind him of his responsibility.

And typical of a mother, she ignores his protests and turns to the servants and instructs them saying, *Do whatever he tells you.* And she walks away, and she leaves the matter to her son.

Now, at this wedding there are six stone water jars. We are told that each of these jars could hold twenty or thirty gallons. The purpose of these jars is that they were to be used for the Jewish rites of purification. It is unlikely that a family would have these jars on hand. It is more likely that they were rented for the occasion.

This sounds elaborate but really, these jars were present simply for the guests to have water for the ritual washing of hands as they entered the home. This was not for hygiene. There was no soap involved. The water in the jars was there for the guests to dip their fingers. The act represents a ritual purification of sin and guilt.

Since Mary has told the servants to do what her son tells them, Jesus then instructs the servants to *Fill the jars with water*. And they do. Possibly they go to a well and draw out water and bring it to the jars and top them off. When they have accomplished this, Jesus says, *Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward*. And they comply. Although, they had topped off the vats with plain water, what they draw out is wine. The steward (think of him as a butler slash party planner) does not know the origin of this wine. He does not know that came from the stone jars. But when he tastes it, he is astonished. He goes to the bridegroom and compliments him saying, *Everyone [else] 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*.

I'm going to use my imagination here and assume that the bridegroom was a bit confused by the word of the steward, complimenting him on the wine. I am guessing that the groom was unaware of how close to disaster he had come.

Have you ever wondered why this story is included in John's gospel? We are so familiar with it that we forget that it is actually an odd little story, especially to find it right at the beginning of the book—the first of Jesus' miracles.

Running out of wine at a wedding is not the end of the world. No one is sick or injured. No war is going to be waged over a shortage of chardonnay. So, when Jesus' mother brings it to his attention, why does he even bother?

Well, the truth of the matter is that while it may not be significant to you or me, it would have been important to the bride and the groom and their families. Running out of wine would have been a socially embarrassing moment. Running out of wine at the wedding is not the way that they would want their marriage to begin; it is not how they would want to start their new life together. This is the sort of *faux pas* could haunt a family for years.

Imagine this: the couple has been married a few years and are dining at the home of friends and one of the guests at the table laughs and says, "Hey, I brought extra wine. Don't want to run out, you know. [wink wink]" Or, they are dining out at a restaurant in their neighborhood and the waiter jokes, "Sorry, we ran out of wine. Only seems to happen when you come here." And when the couple has children, and the kids are in school, and book reports are being assigned, the teacher always asks if they want to write about *The Grapes of Wrath*.

I joke, but there would have been a lot on the line here. A wedding in Cana may not be noteworthy to the world, but it is important to those involved.

And maybe that is why John places this story at the beginning of his gospel. Jesus enters this world—he is the Word of God. He is baptized and then calls twelve followers, and he goes on to conduct a ministry of grace and power. He feeds thousands, heals the sick, calms a storm, raises the dead. Shouldn't John have started with a more commanding story? Something like raising Lazarus? But he doesn't. He starts with a potential hiccup at a family wedding in a small village with Jesus working quietly behind the scenes diverting a social catastrophe which almost no one was aware of. The Wedding at Cana is reminder to us that there are no insignificant acts of mercy.

It is not only a lesson for us, but for his disciples as well. The miracle at Cana was the first of the signs of power witnessed by Jesus' disciples. If they had thought that they were signing up for greatness, this act showed them that greatness comes in small, invisible increments. Their ministry will be to people.

As followers of Christ, we can always be reminded that our ministry must be to people. It is never inappropriate to share the joy of God's love.

Finally, one last thing. Let's go back to those jars of water. These were brought to be used for the purification ritual. All the guests had stopped at them and washed off their sins. These vats had become vats of sin. And yet, Jesus uses them to make something new, to bring life back to a party. Jesus takes the polluted, the impure, the filthy, and creates something extraordinary. May that be us.

Amen.